

Start with the Ending
Matthew 5:3-11
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Today is Groundhog Day. Not one of your most important Christian holidays, even if the idea of a living creature emerging from a hole and announcing the potential for new life should sound somewhat familiar. No, I'd argue that Groundhog Day is best known these days as a movie, the brilliant but exhausting 1993 comedy starring Bill Murray as a jaded and deceitful weatherman who gets stuck in a cycle of living the same day over and over again. No matter how he tries to break free from this repetition—and, as a viewer, you definitely reach a point where you hope he will break free—he seems doomed to go on waking up every morning to “I Got You Babe” on the radio.

It is hilarious...and it is mildly terrifying...and at times, it is a bit too real, surprising substantial. It's a comedy, but the *Groundhog Day* Wikipedia page mentions interpretations of the movie from Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, and spiritually agnostic viewpoints. (This doesn't happen on the *Ghostbusters* page.) The thought of living the same day repeatedly has potential for comedy, but it also accentuates a nearly universal fear, the fear that we're not actually moving forward. This movie is the comedy version of the dream where you're trying to go somewhere but no matter what you do, you never seem to get there.

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One of my favorite musicians is a singer-songwriter named David Wilcox. He got started in the Asheville area in the 1980s, and he has kind of a James Taylor-vibe. His concerts are a mix of songs and stories, so there's often a spoken interlude backed by guitar when you see him live.

He has a song called “Start with the Ending,” the premise of which is that our lives and relationships might be better if we could figure out how to start with the ending and then go back from that point. In his story accompanying this song, Wilcox highlights various points in a life lived backwards—so your body keeps getting younger and more energetic, you get a party and a gold watch on your first day of work, and when it's all over, you go out as a twinkle in someone else's eye...it really does sound lovely.

If you start with the ending, you get to where you're going immediately. This is what Bill Murray's weatherman is longing for the entire movie: just let me get to where I'm going, immediately. It is a proposition fraught with peril—there is a lot of value in the journey, even the tiring and repetitive journey of *Groundhog Day*—but there is also some value with starting with the ending, if it's done carefully, intentionally, deliberately.

It is, after all, what Jesus does with the Sermon on the Mount. He starts with the ending.

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Our gospel scripture today is just the beginning of the most famous sermon never preached, but to appreciate the role of the Beatitudes as the launch for the Sermon on the Mount, it's worth considering a couple of the other high points, namely the middle and the end. The middle of this sermon is another extremely familiar set of verses, verses that we've recited this week and do

every week, the Lord's Prayer. And the end is, again, more familiarity, potentially the most-quoted passage in the gospel, the Golden Rule. If you think about the Sermon on the Mount like an Appalachian hike—which isn't too hard to do, given the title of these three chapters in Matthew—then the Beatitudes are the picture you take at the trailhead when everyone is fresh and excited; the Lord's Prayer is the picture from the mountaintop of a vista that stretches on for miles; and the Golden Rule is the picture at the end, everyone covered in sweat and dirt, proud but ready to be done with it. Those are the only three pictures anyone ever takes while hiking. Those are the things from this sermon that we really want to carry with us, that we hope to frame and hang on our wall and remember in perpetuity.

Except that these pictures seem to be in reverse order. The Golden Rule should be where we start: it's what we absorb as small children, learning to treat others with kindness and generosity. It's easy to understand. The Golden Rule is a neat and clean package, a hopeful aphorism within the grasp of any who care to start the journey through Jesus' words. It seems like it belongs at the beginning.

The Beatitudes, conversely, are a huge mess. They sound poetic, but they're laden with a call for revolution of the greatest scale. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" is a statement that flips the establishment completely upside down. "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" is not a line that the confident, aggressive leaders of a society want to hear. Especially given how familiar these verses have become, we may tend to lose their power in their poetry...but these lines are a call to accept change when no one likes change, to concede power and become powerless, to yield one's understanding of equity and fairmindedness, and (above all else) to work tirelessly to enable all of that to happen. This should be the photo at the end of the hike, the one after the work has been put in. The Beatitudes are what will be accomplished after all of Jesus' other teaching has been adhered to.

Why would Jesus start with the ending, especially an ending that is exhausting and mildly terrifying, one that makes us wonder if we really want to take this hike in the first place?

Three guesses:

- 1) The journey, while valuable, will be a hard one. Jesus knows this. The things he is about to ask of his followers—the lessons he will impart, the challenges he will place before them, and the lives he will bequeath to them—are extraordinarily difficult. Only a charlatan would bait and switch that kind of calling. Jesus has no choice but to lay it out for people from the very beginning.
- 2) Despite this, Jesus is emphasizing that the journey ahead will be filled with happiness. Pope Francis, who is particularly fascinated with the Beatitudes, views the word that begins each of them meaning not only "blessed" but also "happy." He acknowledges that living out these sayings requires a lot of effort, but he believes that they express "that those faithful to God and his word, by their self-giving, gain true happiness."¹ The ending that is offered here is not only a challenge but also a gift, a path that is arduous but one that leads to extreme joy. It makes sense to put both the joy and the toil at the beginning.

¹ Pope Francis, *Rejoice And Be Glad*. Quoted by Thomas Reese, "Pope Francis on the Beatitudes," *Religion News Service*, May 17, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/05/17/pope-francis-on-the-beatitudes/>.

- 3) Perhaps more than anything, Matthew is reminding everyone where they're going, where their communal focus is or should be. The Matthean gospel isn't just about treating others with kindness, or about letting go of material things, or about understanding anger and forgiveness in a new light: it's about doing those things because doing so will revolutionize the planet.

None of those answers is going to be wholly satisfying—trying to offer a comprehensive analysis of the Beatitudes in a communion homily is like the time during my senior year in high school when I tried to read *Crime & Punishment* in one night (which is a whole other story I'll gladly tell you sometime)—but that last answer seems worth lingering over a little. By starting with the ending, this Sermon makes it perfectly clear where Jesus expects his followers to go. It is incredibly helpful to have a clear sense of where we're going.

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One of the books I read during my last round in divinity school was a business management book called *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. In it, he analyzes several businesses who met with unprecedented success, looking for the keys to their operations that allowed them to thrive where similar companies faltered. One trait that he noticed was that all of the successful businesses singled out one thing, one goal, one attribute that they wanted to be known for more than anything else. They then stayed focused on that goal no matter what else came their way. They occasionally even eschewed things that were good because those things—while good—weren't part of their one thing.

If this mentality sounds familiar, it's possible that you're remembering a sermon that Lynn Lingafelt preached here several years ago. She made a similar point, asking us what our One Thing was.

To start with the ending is to know what your One Thing is. It is to lay out in front of you a goal to pursue unswervingly, a characteristic to cling to fervently. With the Beatitudes, Jesus is laying out One Thing for his followers: a revolutionary approach to life grounded in gentle generosity, and a promise of ensuing holy joy.

Too often, we lose sight of our One Thing. We go through routines without thinking about them, continue practices that have long outlived their usefulness, or build upon assumptions that were faulty in the first place. When that happens, we find ourselves needing to start again with the ending squarely in our sights.

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In *Groundhog Day*—and here's your spoiler alert for a movie that is over 25 years old—Bill Murray's character eventually breaks the cycle and wakes up to a different song. He does so because he recognizes that his One Thing is to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly throughout his life. Had he recognized this earlier, he could have started with the ending himself...because the end of his cycle is the beginning of a new life.

Wherever we are in our journey, we must know which ending we are hiking toward...and then we must be willing to stay focused on achieving that goal, even when it is frightening or exhausting.