

An UN-common sense

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
February 13, 2022
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

How have heard the words “common sense” used in your experience? You know common sense.

A political party used it as their anthem for a time, but their common sense did not ring true for me. Common Sense for them meant cutting social programs that protected the most vulnerable. Common Sense was then more about popular opinion, about wisdom or the collective good.

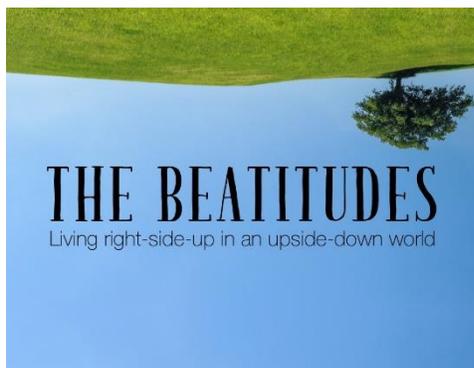
“That’s just common sense, Dave! Don’t eat too much. Get a good night’s sleep.” This sounds sensible. But *common sense* is not always a good. It is not always based on science or fact.

Remember 40 or 50 years ago? I was very young then, when Church and Government still operated Residential Schools. It was a time when, if a child had the courage to be who they truly were, perhaps coming out as gay, this was seen as a problem to be solved. Only in 1976 that seatbelts were made mandatory in cars! I seem to recall hearing people complain bitterly about being forced to buckle up – how oppressive!



So, if I’m correct in my assessment of our culture, common sense can often be determined by a group of people.

Nobody really likes to pay taxes, but I think we all understand, that there is value to collectively paying for infrastructure – roads, health care, services to homes and neighbourhoods. There will always be a group that values the social safety net less than others.



I’m guessing that the average person listening to Jesus, his proclamation of who is “blessed” in God’s kin-dom vision, and then, “woe to” the other folks – was probably shocking to some who heard it in that ancient time. Jesus’ Hebrew Scripture predecessors, the prophets, used this language regularly. Jesus drew from the prophets, but he instead talked about God’s “Realm” or vision – often also called kingdom, or, I call it, kin-dom. Jesus invites people to live into that vision – whatever their social standing, regardless of ethnicity or gender.

Jesus has, just before this, appointed apostles and now he is orienting – or dis-orienting, to be more accurate – his team of apostles, disciples and the many people clamouring to hear him. This probably was perplexing to his apostles and disciples, but perhaps profoundly confusing for the passers-by who stopped to listen. This is not “common sense” by any popular standard, whether ancient or modern.

You're blessed if you're poor, hungry, or if you weep, for yours will be the kin-dom. How could this be true? On the surface it sounds like Jesus is glorifying suffering. But, theologically, this is Jesus describing those who can get "kin-dom values" – either outsiders in society or people willing to renounce the culturally accepted common sense in order to follow God's vision which is very counter cultural.

Think of the perplexing choices Jesus made in the Gospels. The rich and poor people that were reviled by community, but Jesus made himself impure by eating with them, touching them, just being with them! Jesus was not at all teaching the culturally accepted *common sense* that faithful parents would have taught their children, for example. This is very un-common.

I wonder what it was about Jesus, then, that held people's attention for that sermon on the plain? Was it the revolutionary tone? Was it sensationalism? Or, was it more about this vision, this realm, that seemed so out of step with the way the world was. They liked this uncommon sense. The way it was then, and I dare say it still is now.

This world as we know it today does not feel grounded in mercy, community values like compassion, and putting the vulnerable first when making political policies. Even though Jewish Law dictated care for the vulnerable, Jesus' words were a challenge to that ancient outdoor congregation. Perplexed, perhaps completely disoriented, but I'm betting that listeners got the gist.

And listeners who felt the weight of the woes: *You who are rich, you who are full, woe to those of you who laugh, and of whom people speak well of.* At first glance this sounds like Jesus just wants people to be miserable. Read on in Luke's Gospel and you see that Jesus' actions elaborate on these blessings and woes. He doesn't judge a person for being rich, but he does tell the rich young ruler that he will never understand God's vision until he lets go of material possessions. [Lk 18: 18-23]

And "being full", "laughing", "longing for people to speak well of us", all sentiments that I, and you, can relate to at times in our lives. Our collective inclination as humans is to get what we need. We feel the tug of conscience when we see a person living in the cold, but living that out would take a sacrifice, letting go of, our privilege. Woe to us, until we learn to let go, so that we finally understand this kin-dom vision.

We can't contrive this. We can't even create it, if we are on board. It is a holy vision that needs to be the foundation, And we say yes – like Jeremiah, like Isaiah, like teenaged Mary. Saying yes to God's invitation to be part of the kin-dom community.

I think about the gift that Black Lives Matter has given us – by "us" I mean privileged non-racial people like me, and many in our congregation. The gift is the call to let go of the safety of being around those who always agree with us. An invitation to let go of some of what has been taught to us as common sense, but is really the preservation of my power and privilege.

Blessed are you who are reviled. Imagine being at a gathering with privileged people who spout racial slurs, and. I know you've been there. I have too. And to step up and call this out as not common sense but nonsense, well blessed are you. You're not feeling blessed, but you and I, in those moments, are taking a baby step towards God's kin-dom vision.

I have been facing some great challenges in my ministry here at St. Andrew's – I was called here with a job description. But I'm betting that I'm not alone in realizing that it is hard to focus on the expected jobs when it seems like the world is on fire outside.

Racial strife. A political struggle around mandatory vaccinations, the battle between community values and individual rights. We in churches are on a journey towards healing with Indigenous communities torn apart by our residential schools. There is poverty in our neighbourhood, and we know it. This is not something we can fix. But Justice Murray Sinclair who led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission said in response to the question "what can we do?"¹

He said: *Show up*. Meaning, we need to *step up*, and *sign up* for workshops on racial issues, *look up* what great work downtown agencies are doing for the chronically homeless and the addicted in our neighbourhoods - and we help when we can.

Blessed are those who reject what the world calls common sense, and choose instead the uncommon sense of Jesus; of love that is willing to let go of some of our comforts and privileges that disconnect us from community. Amen.

¹ Seminar by Murray Sinclair. May 28, 2021 for Antler River Watership Regional Council UCC, Western Ontario Waterways Regional Council and Horseshoe Falls Regional Council