

POOR IN SPIRIT

When I was in the fourth grade, my father asked me one day which of the four Gospels was my favorite. I said, "Matthew." He said, "Why do you like Matthew best?" I said, "Because of the Beatitudes." My father did not say to me, "But Luke has his own version of the Beatitudes. Why do you like Matthew's better?" He just looked at me quizzically for a moment then said, "That is an excellent answer." I do not remember that we had further conversation on the subject. We did not have extensive conversation on any subject in those days, except on the subject of my chores. But I do remember that I read the Bible even more often and more earnestly after that, because my father cared whether or not I read the Bible, and what I thought about it.

Years later I discovered it was partly a fluke. My father confessed that he had been in a discussion with some of the church leaders (he was an Elder) about giving Bibles to the third-grade Sunday School class. Some argued that third-graders were too young and that none of them ever read these Bibles. Others insisted that it was time we at least had a Bible, that we should be encouraged to carry them to church, and that Sunday School teachers should include times in each class session when we would find and read passages in them as part of our class study. My father told them he was pretty sure that I actually did read the Bible they had given me, and that I might even be understanding bits and pieces of what I was reading – but he would find out and report back. Hence, my Pop quiz.

Well, I know that I had very little comprehension of the inner meanings of the Beatitudes when I was in fourth grade. But I also know that they held a special magic for me. I could tell, somehow, that they were beautiful, and powerful, and full of wonderful things that God wanted for me. I do not know how I knew that. The rational mind is only part of our radar system, wonderful though it may be. And that is why I believe the Bible to be "the Word of God" – not because of what is on the page, but because something deeper than the page reaches to something deeper than my outer mind. Sometimes it happens with other books, but usually if I go back over them, it is a diminishing return. With the Bible it happens over and over, and when I go back over it, the experience increases instead of decreases.

How I wish I could preach and teach from that other level, and that our conversations and discussions could include not only the intellectual and rational level, but all the deeper dimensions of our spiritual awareness systems. Alas, though Rodger and the Choir bring us further dimensions, and though you all come with gifts and awareness beyond mere reason, I am stuck putting words together like some child playing with blocks. And you have to take it from there and move it to much better places. A thing, by the way, which many of you do with amazing skill and awareness. At least it keeps me happy enough to go on playing with my blocks.

With mixed feelings of delight, eagerness, and humility, I want to set before you the Beatitudes as the substance of our special theme and journey through Lent this year. Because I have loved them since the fourth grade, I presume that you all know and love them too. Doubtless there are instances where this is not the case, but hopefully it will soon become the case. If nothing else, I hope for the rest of your life that you will know automatically that the Beatitudes are found in the fifth chapter of Matthew, and that they begin the Sermon on the Mount (meaning, you will always know where to find that too). I hope many of you will memorize the Beatitudes this Lent. Only, do it the easy way. Read them so often that they simply start to stick and will not shake loose. Then they will start to work for you in times and ways that otherwise cannot happen.

A very minor illustration: You are driving down the road, hungry and tired at the end of a trying day. Some S.O.B. suddenly cuts in front of you without signal or warning of any kind, narrowly missing your fender, then honks, gives you the finger, hits his brakes right in front of you, then speeds off. But you were on to him from the moment his front tire started to turn. You smile, give him the room he needs, shake your head in sadness at his attitude and discomfort, send a prayer after him, and continue toward home with a growing calmness and confidence. What happened? It is called "Taking the Seventh." It dropped in on you from out of nowhere just when you needed it: *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."*

It is not my point, but is there any doubt in your mind that if there were enough peacemakers out there, the roads would be safer, we would have fewer accidents, it would be more pleasant to drive, and we would all get where we were going easier and faster?

Anyway, there is nothing in there about blessed are the angry; blessed are the vengeful; blessed are the retaliators; blessed are those who make sure nobody ever gets away with anything. The Beatitudes do not stroke our “natural” side. They reach for something far more beautiful, powerful, and deeper within us. And while we do not live on that plane all the time, more and more we really would like to. It is nice to come home to our loved ones more often in peace than in anger. We do not have to punish the guy who cuts us off in traffic. He is doing a better job of it than we could ever do. Can he be aware of the Kingdom – trying to live for it – while he stays in that mode? The Beatitudes keep taking us back home – if we take them in until they become a working part of us.

Please do not stay with the illustration. Stay with the point. The point is to read the Beatitudes this Lent until they are part of you. The Beatitudes are better, more profound, more powerful than anything my sermons can portray. The sermons are only hints. Let the Beatitudes become your own real theme this Lent, not just a few minutes on Sunday. Read them over and over until you can read them without opening The Book. Try not to decide in any rigid way what impact and effect they are going to have on you. Try not to get on a campaign to change yourself. Just get to know them. Let them in. Let them have their own effect, in their own way, in their own time. In other words, do not go to work on yourself. Let the Spirit do it.

For my part, I will try to show you that the Beatitudes are the spiritual program that Jesus lined out for His followers. There are other places to find it: in the Lord’s Prayer; tucked away in the parables and sayings; we can watch Jesus’ own patterns and responses. But the Sermon on the Mount (or Plain, in Luke) is where it is summarized most clearly. Specifically, the Nine Steps of the Spiritual Life are set forth in the Beatitudes. Though the Beatitudes are a very high WAY, strangely enough they are also steps we can take and choices we can make – when they appeal to us enough for us to truly want them. *Please* prepare yourself to feel surprised and pleased every time you take the step and every time you make the choice according to one of the Beatitudes, rather than feeling ashamed, guilty, or discouraged every time you fail to live up to one of the Beatitudes. The goal is to choose the Way of the Beatitudes more and more often, as fast as we can become aware – as fast as we can truly want this manner of life. Turn it into a perfection game, and you will lose it all.

So here we go: Lent à la the Beatitudes – the blessings. Jesus’ outline of how to live a blessed life, a fulfilled life – how to walk in the Way of the Kingdom of God. I will do anything and everything I can to make it as clear as I can on the mental level. I will relate it to the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) because more and more people are familiar with these steps, and they have been applied to endless additional areas of recovery. “Calvinism” is an unpleasant word, perhaps, in the vocabulary of our culture, but any student of religion knows that Calvinism, properly understood, is the heart and core of nearly all Protestant expressions of Christianity. (John Calvin was no Calvinist any more than Jesus was a Christian, at least not according to the most popular misconceptions of these terms.) It is the base and foundation of American culture, however far we may stray from its precepts. Most certainly it is the foundation of all Puritan concepts and expectations – both theology and ethics. With churches in our time becoming more and more entertainment centers for spectators, and less and less gathering places for bands of disciples who really mean to walk the Christian Way, where has Calvinism gone? A river so mighty cannot simply disappear. It can be absorbed by a bigger river or it can go underground for a while, but it cannot just suddenly cease to flow as if it never existed. If it is hard to start things, it is also hard to stop them. Where has Calvinism gone in our time? It is alive and well – and changing the lives of thousands of people – introducing them into the practices and disciplines it has always proclaimed. Calvinism exists and survives in many places, at various levels of clarity and strength, but its major flow in our time is in the twelve-step programs that dot the landscape, existing in small working groups of serious devotees in every village, hamlet, town, and city across our country. We have five Bible Study groups in this church, with about fifty-seven participants in study every week. Do you know how many AA groups meet in just our area every week? One hundred and nine. And that is not nearly all the twelve-step groups, just AA.

The twelve-step program came straight out of the working side of Christianity, via Calvinism via the Oxford Group Movement. So as we get back in touch with the source – the Beatitudes, and the Sermon on the Mount – some of you will find it interesting and helpful if we connect it to one of its clearest present-day expressions. Sometimes comparison and contrast help us to see more clearly. [At the end of this sermon is a side-by-side comparison you might find useful.]

The first beatitude, the first step of AA, the first step on any authentic spiritual path the world over is always the same – no matter how many different ways we say it, no matter from how many different directions we try to come at it. The first step is always the hardest, though not necessarily the most difficult. This is because heading in any new direction requires us to make a choice, a choice between continuing in the direction we have been going, or heading onto a new path or way. We always have a certain investment, usually a pretty big one, in what direction we have been going and how we have been doing things. Taking the first step in a new direction requires a decision that puts us at risk. That is, what we counted on in the past to keep us alive and give us benefit and progress is now abandoned. What, then, will keep us alive and help us if we go in a new way and on a different basis? If all my life I have depended upon anger to help me get my way and protect me from threats and danger, how will I survive if I turn onto a way that does not depend upon anger, that does not even consider anger to be a proper tool? It makes me furious just to think about it – about having to give up my anger – at least at first.

The first step on any new way is the hardest because it is a *new* way. Can we trust a new way when we have not even had time to test it out? Can we depart from a former way when we have trusted it for so long and depended on it so often? Well, if the new way has enough promise and appeal, and if the old way has enough flaws and detriments – and we have finally noticed this and can admit it – then humans really will risk the change.

So the first step on any authentic spiritual path is to exchange pride for humility. Pride is categorically unteachable. Humility is categorically eager to learn. More specifically, we exchange pride in our own power and ability to govern our lives, for the humility of trusting in a Higher Power, a God, an inner voice that is not generated from our own desires and needs, and that we cannot control: the Holy Spirit.

“I want a drink. I need a drink. A drink would be good. One drink never hurt anybody. Nobody even has to know.” But the other Voice says, “Not today. Tomorrow is a long way off, but we have decided not to drink today.” Listening to my own voice has not worked out as well as I thought it would or could. More and more, the results have not been entirely desirable. I fooled with it for years – adjusting it, correcting it, perfecting it – but the evidence kept mounting. Doing it my way was not good enough – I mean, not even for me. There was a lot of good intention, and some good

things happened, and for a long time I could keep twisting it around to fool myself. But the diminishing returns were more and more devastating. How many hangovers, how many divorces, how many lost relationships, how many lost opportunities, how much loneliness and pain and despair ... before we decide it may be time to try a new way?

So finally I decided to listen to the *other* Voice instead of to my own. The other Voice has always been there. I have always heard it. But I have not always been willing to admit that it was there, or to listen, or to follow its direction.

What confuses a lot of people is that most of us make a decision to follow this other Voice by category – by area of life – rather than once and for all. Sometimes we see illustrations of a massive conversion, like with the Apostle Paul, or Augustine. But most of us do it one segment at a time, because only one segment at a time becomes spiritually conscious to us. We turn will and life over to God at home, but keep running things our own way at work – or vice versa. We let God be our God when it comes to our own choices and disciplines, but reserve the right to raise our children our own way – or vice versa. We let God decide how to use our time, but we stay in charge of how to use our money – or vice versa.

When I was a young pastor, it shocked and dismayed me when I discovered, in my first church, that one of my most devout and dedicated deacons was also one of the worst racial bigots in the territory. How is it possible for a sincere Christian to be a racial bigot? Back then, a lot of people said it simply was not possible – that the guy was a hypocrite and a phony. I'm sorry, but I got to know him too well. He was as sincere and dedicated a Christian as you would ever want to meet. But life had handed him some experiences that marred and scarred him until shields toward black people had grown a mile thick. It was not my doing, but I was lucky enough to be around when the Spirit finally found a way to get into that warded, shielded area of prejudice. I mean, it's easy for me to say it was wonderful, and it certainly was impressive to watch the change, but it damn near put this guy under. A whole lifetime of convictions – of hate and anger – shot to hell with one clear beam of light. The repercussions can be terrifying. Has it ever happened to you? Of course. And you know it will again – unless you really *are* perfect ... or stop having any dealings with the Christ of God.

The first step is to change pride for humility – stop trusting our own way. The first step of AA is: “*We admitted we were powerless*” Lots of people balk right there. They stop at the door when they run into this first step, and go back and drink for a few more years. The first beatitude is: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*” A lot of people balk at that too, and go back to their sin (alienation from God) for a few more years. To be sure, we have our reasons and excuses. Sometimes we even pretend that it is because we cannot understand – that the wording is too strange and archaic. But you see past it, or into it, don’t you? If I said to you, “That horse is really high-spirited,” or “Be careful not to break that child’s spirit,” you would not have much trouble following me, would you? We often used the word “spirit” to refer to a person’s will, or willfulness, or self-confidence – their inner drive – their determination to shape the world to their own desires and designs. Our problem is not with hearing, but with believing what we are hearing. Jesus says, “Happy – blessed – open to receiving God and God’s guidance and gifts and blessings – blessed are you when you stop trusting your own spirit to direct your life and get you everything you want.” “Blessed are you when you know your own spirit is too small and weak and poor to direct and sustain you in the fullness of true LIFE.” “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*” We hear it; we just prefer to believe that making our own spirits stronger and stronger is the better way to go – more likely to get us what we want.

I believe, and suspect you do too, that the real import of the first beatitude is not only about recognizing the inadequacy (poverty) of our own spirit, but switching to the Holy Spirit – going from trusting our own spirit to trusting God’s Spirit. Interesting that both the first step and the first beatitude do not bother to spell this out. We admitted we were powerless; we recognized that our own spirits were too poor to make it. It is as if both expressions of the first step know that if we change attitude from pride to humility – if we break through the aberration that we can do it on our own – then the shields will crumble. And since God is the Creator and is everywhere – and since God cares for us – if the shields crumble, if the wall comes down, if the blinders fall off ... God is there. We do not have to do anything fancy to get God to come into our lives; we just have to stop warding him off. When the shields go down, God is right there. If we can get past – that is, stop trusting – our pride, our self-confidence, our aggression, our willfulness, our determination, then God can come be our God, guide our lives, use us, and bless us, and many others through us.

By the way, some people use the term “self-confidence” to mean a confidence in the self that God made and is directing. You have to determine by context and attitude whether they really mean *self*-confidence, or if they mean the confidence the self can have in God. In any case, a lot of people balk at the door when they discover what the first step is about. They go back to running their own lives, at least for a while.

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.” The humility step. We are powerless over a lot more than alcohol, but first things first – one category at a time. If you are an alcoholic, no improvement, however profound, will make a significant or lasting difference unless you take care of the primary problem first.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Do you hear anything in there about the future? Do you hear anything about the “Second Coming” – that “Jesus is coming soon”? Do you hear anything about a future promise – that if you are good, or if you do it right, after a while you will be rewarded? Do you hear any hint about “pie in the sky, by and by”? You maybe dub it in, but you do not hear it, for it is not there. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.”* When will you be given the Kingdom of Heaven? When will it start for you? When will you be able to live in it, and for it – feel its truth, and warmth, and beauty? Before your next heartbeat. Before the next breath you take – if you are poor in spirit ... if you turn humbly to God. Blessed are those who know their absolute need of God’s personal presence in their lives ... who take down all traces and pretenses of self-sufficiency ... who know their souls will survive without God just as well as their lungs will survive without air, or their hearts without blood.

They will not “be given” the Kingdom. They *have* the Kingdom. *“Theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.”* A done deal. Signed, sealed, delivered. If you ever have problems at the entryway – problems getting in, getting started, being part of it – never think it is about something you have done wrong. Never think it is about timing, or waiting, or getting better, or passing a test, or getting approved. This is not Disneyland. There is no standing in line. Check pride, grab humility – and you are in!

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The Beatitudes and The Twelve-Step Program

First Beatitude Poor in spirit; humble (Matthew 5:3)	First Step Christian “humility” and AA “powerlessness” are a close parallel
Second Beatitude Mourn; remember (Matthew 5:4)	Fourth & Fifth Steps To mourn is to remember, take inventory, confession, remorse, penitence, sorrow for the damage we have done
Third Beatitude Meek; obedient; subservient to God (only) (Matthew 5:5)	Third & Eleventh Steps Turn will and life over to God; asking only to carry out the will of God
Fourth Beatitude Hunger for righteousness (Matthew 5:6)	Sixth & Seventh Steps Take action to right our wrongs, repair the damage we have done, make amends
Fifth Beatitude Merciful (Matthew 5:7)	Eighth & Ninth Steps Not an exact parallel; AA does not deal with those who have harmed us – too busy the other way around
Sixth Beatitude Pure in heart is to will one thing (Matthew 5:8)	No corresponding Step However, every AA meeting starts with the comments: “With all the earnestness at our command, we beg you to be fearless and thorough from the very start.... Half measures availed us nothing.”
Seventh Beatitude Peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)	Tenth Step Admit wrongs quickly; keep cleaning it up
Eighth Beatitude Persecuted; rejoice and be glad (Matthew 5:10-12)	Eleventh Step Knowledge of His will for us, spokesmen for God, people of prayer, obedient servants
Ninth Beatitude Salt; light (Matthew 5:13-16)	Twelfth Step Salt practices these principles in all its affairs; light carries the message to others who still suffer

Matthew 5:1-16; 6:10
Isaiah 61:1-1
Psalm 37:8-17
Numbers 12:3

TO MOURN AND BE MEEK

If we do not drink deeply of the first beatitude – if we do not take the first step – none of the others will do us any good. They may, in fact, do us a great deal of harm. Like playing with a chemistry set, fooling around with the spiritual life without any notion of what we are doing can be quite dangerous.

I tried last week to lift up the humility step, the first beatitude: admitted we are powerless – confessed our absolute need of God’s presence and guidance, mercy and forgiveness. I did not do it well enough, but lots of you got it anyway, and that is what matters. But if you were not here last week, or if you forgot to remember our Lenten theme during the week, then I can do you a lot of damage today. Despite what a few of you seem to think, that is not my purpose or desire. Yet I do not have time to go over the first beatitude again today. So I want to warn you – a quick and simple, but earnest, warning.

If you try, for instance, to mourn when you are still in “pride” mode, not in “humility” mode, you will end up feeling guilty for the wrong things. You will try to correct by moving in wrong directions, and it will lead toward depression and despair. There is no doubt that some people stay out of the Christian Life – or make big problems in the church when they get into it – because they are unwilling to repent, to confess their sin(s), to take an honest look at their own faults, and so naturally it is impossible for them to grow or change in any good direction. That is a really big problem. But it is a big problem with maybe only ten or fifteen percent of the people, and only on rare occasion or in special circumstances with the rest.

A gigantic problem in comparison is the fifty or sixty percent of the congregation who are feeling guilty about the wrong things. So many of us are trying to recover from our best gifts; trying to feel guilty about our virtues; begging God to forgive us for causing trouble, when it was God trying to get us to cause that very trouble, only ten times more besides. If we “mourn” outside the humility place – outside the poverty of spirit which knows that only God’s wisdom and guidance can lead us aright – then we turn over the most tender and vulnerable places within us to our

own prejudices, willfulness, perfectionism, judgment, and hatred. Stop and think: If you were capable of loving yourself as you should, of forgiving yourself rightly, of healing and encouraging and affirming and inspiring yourself to anywhere near the level you truly need, then you would *be* God, or, at the very least, a very highly developed spiritual saint.

So, it is important to not try the second beatitude until you have genuinely and sincerely worked the first beatitude. Or, to use our most mundane imagery: If you take the second step without having taken the first step, you are going to fall flat on your face. Some people think they can manage if they just learn to hop. But it is only an attempt to cheat, and they fall twice as hard. In the spiritual life, there is no way to cheat. Pretend hope, pretend love, pretend peace, pretend faith ... simply do not work.

One more illustration: If we try to move straight to hungering and thirsting for righteousness without taking the humility step first, we only end up angry and hateful toward all those who make mistakes and fail to do righteous acts as we define them. Pretty soon we also start getting angry and hateful toward ourselves because we cannot be everywhere or help everybody either. Hungering for righteousness while we are still in the pride of life – still playing God instead of humbly worshipping (trying to serve) God – is a witches' brew. Satan uses it to undo the church every chance he gets, and the only antidote – because righteousness is such a wonderful motive – is taking the first step first.

Enough warning and preamble. "*Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.*" The second beatitude. Why is mourning so important to the spiritual life? Why is it important enough to be second on the list? There is no question about it: We all have a lot of grief and sorrow in our lives. We work hard sometimes to cut the awareness, to put it on the back shelf so we can go on. It is hard to drive through places in Santa Ana, never mind Tijuana or India, without being so struck by the magnitude of human desolation that one must literally shield – play mind games to numb the sensitivity – or it would simply overwhelm us. So are we supposed to open back up to this desolation so we can weep uncontrollably? I suspect at times we do need to do that, to get our humanity back. But I do not think that is the major meaning of this beatitude.

So, as is frequently true, we have a vocabulary problem. Mostly we associate mourning with funerals. Mostly we associate comfort with getting

a pat on the head or a reassuring hug, and somebody telling us they love us and things will be all right. So most of the impressions of this second beatitude have to do with our sadness when loved ones die and Jesus comforts us with the promise of eternal life. *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* (Revelation 21:4) Please do not think I have any complaint with that message. I deeply believe it. I am extremely grateful for it. I get it from quite a few places in the New Testament, but my suspicion is that the second beatitude is not talking about that.

I do remember that Jesus’ sermon, when He came home to Nazareth, was taken from the prophet Isaiah, the passage that said: *“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted ... to comfort all who mourn ... to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.”* (Isaiah 61:2, 3)

So it is not hard to assume that there is a direct connection between Jesus’ primary purpose, as He set it forth, and this second beatitude. I think it is responsible scholarship to point out that Jesus may have been saying to His followers that anybody who did not mourn over the plight of Israel, anybody who did not grieve because of Roman domination, anybody who did not live with a deep and abiding sorrow because God’s Chosen Nation was not free to carry on its true destiny and purpose, anybody so shallow or shielded that they no longer wept in anguish and sorrow for the plight of Israel ... had no place among the followers of Jesus. I would not find it hard to track and trace the meaning from there, to a sorrow we should all have for the alienation of this world from God, and all the ways it is expressed in poverty and disease, in tyranny and cruelty, in blighted lives and the callousness of unfair systems, in unjust and unloving people. The fact that none of us can escape from this reality does not make it any less real. And whatever comfort there is in this awareness has to be far in the future, and mostly in another realm, yet that is no reason to be lazy or to put off working in this realm.

Nevertheless, while it is legitimate exegesis and interpretation and it often reaches and moves me, mourning because we are not yet in Heaven is not my deepest understanding of this beatitude. Mourning for separations and losses here is something I do, partly because I cannot help it and partly because it is honest and helpful. And that mourning helps me to know what people really mean to me and what blessings they have brought by their lives and efforts among us.

But for me, deepest of all the layers of meaning in this beatitude is the mourning for my own condition – my own mistakes and alienation and blunders and evil. To mourn is to remember, to reflect, to look quietly and honestly – at who I am, at what I do and fail to do, at what my record is truly like – without flinching or excuse. To mourn is to see my motives as they really are, and to know how mixed they are. To mourn is to shy away from neither darkness nor light. We have the sayings: “Know thyself.” “The unexamined life is not worth living.” In AA it is called the fourth step: “*Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*”

It is a thing we all know we need to do. It is a thing we all tend to neglect. It takes too much time; it seems so self-centered; it’s often highly uncomfortable. But it is one of the needs we all have for the interior life – for sufficient time in prayer to keep up with what is going on behind the scenes, and reflect on what is going on out on the surface of life as well. Without it, we are soon strangers to ourselves, and uncertain about how we really feel about much of anything, or anyone. For years I have listened to people moan (not mourn) about how they (or someone else) do not spend enough time with the kids, with the spouse, with friends, or with God. But it all stems from insufficient time with ourselves. So many people have no real or working relationship with themselves. How could they possibly know what they really care about? How could they then reprioritize their lives to make consistent time for wife or children or God? Their survival levels of life are as far as they have awakened.

In AA, a proper fourth step is written, and takes most people several months. It is tantamount to writing your autobiography, only with no intention of publishing it or coloring it for anybody else’s consumption. In Jesus’ day, most people did not write as much as we do, and their memories were far better developed. But that is what I think the second beatitude is about: taking personal inventory, without running from any of it, without changing or coloring any of it. “*Blessed are they that mourn*” – those who remember, reflect, face themselves, get to truly know themselves.

“*They shall be comforted.*” The comfort is powerful and surprising. First of all, there is more than darkness down underneath. You were created by God – a very incredible God. And God has built into you motives, gifts, sensitivity, caring, and a special identity far greater than most mortals ever fully discover. And God has built into you the hunger and capacity for your spirit to connect with his Spirit. That connection awaits those who mourn. The comfort of that connection is beyond description.

In olden times, they called it “*the peace that passes all understanding.*” (Philippians 4:7)

Of course, not all of it is beyond understanding. But we have to remember what “comfort” really means. What most people mean when they say “comfort” is solace, consolation. And that is what they want. Nothing wrong with solace; I like to be cheered up too, if it is genuine. Sympathy is a good thing. A hug, a pat on the head or wherever it will do the most good, is wonderful. Only, the beatitude promises something better than that. It promises COMFORT: *Com* = with. *Fortes* = fortified, fortress, to be made strong – to be strengthened. YOU WILL BE MADE STRONG. You will come out of your mourning strong – to engage in the battle again – as who you really are, and for what you really care about. Of course, “comfort” is English from Latin. But *parakaleo*, the New Testament Greek word, also means “strengthening.” And its root gives us a hint about how that comfort comes: *parakaleo* means “called near” – “called to one’s side.” Our mourning gets us honest and open enough that Christ can call us to His side, and we can then go forth with Him beside us. Humans do not get stronger than that. Watch the ones who have tried it. A change comes over them. Aurelius Augustine comes to mind, because we can still read his “Confessions” (of St. Augustine). He gave us a written record of his mourning. The strength that came from it, many historians suspect, saved the church when the Roman Empire fell to pagan invaders. An overstatement, no doubt, but Augustine was incredible. And who, before his conversion, would have expected him to be of moral fiber enough to support a wet noodle?

In any case, we can trust the inner structure of the Beatitudes. That is, if you think you have mourned but did not get strengthened, then whatever you did, it was not a genuine mourning. Either it was not honest, or it was not thorough, or it was laced with excuses, or something diluted it. Jesus is not just offering suggestions or positing untried theories. This is the core of His spiritual program. He really means it. “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*”

There is no question about it. You cannot do a genuine fourth step and not be strengthened by it. You cannot do genuine mourning and not be made strong by it. That is not the question. The question is: Will we take time to do it?

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I am apologetic about doubling up beatitudes on a single Sunday. The second beatitude is more than enough for us to ponder and deal with at one time. But having the Beatitudes as our theme this Lent has wonderful possibilities for us, and we already established that the real discipline of Lent is not about a few minutes on Sunday morning, but about our letting the Beatitudes into our lives all day, every day, throughout Lent. Are you reading them over and over? Are they starting to stick?

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” The third beatitude. Actually, this is the eleventh step in AA, but most of my AA friends find it and do it in the third step, and renew it on a deeper level at the eleventh step. The third step reads: *“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”*

Does that sound the same as *“Blessed are the meek”*? Let’s see if I can cut through the haze a little faster on this one. First of all, the perception of the word “meek” is really misleading in our time and culture. What most people think of as “meek” could not inherit a used toothbrush, never mind the earth. Even Webster – the dictionary, that is – while still remembering a few traces of where the word comes from, has so lost the context that the meaning is reversed. It says: “lacking spirit, or backbone; submissive, compliant: mild: soft: gentle: kind.”

A distant trace is there, but clearly that is not what the Bible means by “meek.” Let’s change the subject for a minute and talk about Moses. Moses, as you know, was raised by an Egyptian princess in Pharaoh’s court. When he was a man, Moses slew an Egyptian guard who was mistreating a Hebrew slave. Not wanting to pay the penalty for this murder, Moses fled into the Sinai, met Jethro, married Jethro’s daughter Zipporah, and settled down to the life of a Bedouin. While tending sheep for Jethro on the side of a mountain, Moses encountered a burning bush. That theophany sent him back to Egypt, despite the price on his head – back to confront the Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the face of the earth. Into Pharaoh’s presence marched Moses – not once, but many times – not in supplication, but to demand in no uncertain terms that Pharaoh should let his slaves go free. Even Abraham Lincoln did not get away with that one without paying a terrible price – thousands of lives, including his own.

After all the startling confrontations and a miraculous deliverance, Moses led this disorganized band of frightened, superstitious, stubborn, often ungrateful people for forty years, surviving all manner of rebellion,

plots against his life, natural disasters, plague, famine, and drought. It flat-out does not seem possible that he could have done what he did. But – we want to know, the Bible wants to know – how was this possible? The answer comes in Numbers 12:3: *“Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth.”*

Moses was not what any of us would call meek, by today’s definitions. But yes, he was submissive, he was compliant, he was obedient – TO GOD. He was not submissive or obedient to Pharaoh, or to any other human being on the face of the earth. In fact, he could not have been submissive to anyone else *and* remained submissive and obedient to God. And that is precisely what the Bible means by meek: obedient to God, and God alone. *“You shall worship the Lord your God, with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength – and him only ... shall you serve.”*

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Why inherit the earth? To me, this is the most troubling phrase in the Beatitudes. Does it come from the apocalyptic dreams of the time – a day of righteousness when God will set all things right, and New Jerusalem shall come down out of Heaven and the righteous shall have their reward? That works. However, because of a number of other teachings and because of His death and resurrection, I do not think that was Jesus’ manner of thinking or believing. But I know His followers thought in this way for a couple of generations (and some still do).

I know that evil and its regimes do not last in this world nearly as long as it seems like they do. The thousand years of the Third Reich lasted about ten years, or maybe seven, or five, depending on when you start counting. We are not even sure of the name of the Pharaoh who defied Moses. Nero demanded that the whole world call him a god, but he only lasted for fourteen years. So the meek really are part of the ongoing threads and themes. While I believe that to be true, it is not strong enough for this beatitude.

The meek shall inherit the *ge* – the soil, the land, the place, the earth. I suspect Jesus meant that the meek shall inherit the Kingdom, and we went in the wrong direction with the euphemism.

In any case, the meek are obedient to God – and to no one and nothing else. What do *you* think that will allow them to inherit? More importantly, this week we concentrate on the second and third beatitudes: blessed are they that mourn ... and blessed are the meek. Are we among those who mourn? Are we among the meek?

PRAYER

O Thou, apart from whom all life disintegrates, disenchant our hearts with the ways of the world – and those ways in our own lives – which do not honor Thee.

When being responsible citizens of the world turns into a personal crusade against people we do not like or understand, call us back to Thee. When generosity shades into bribery for the glory or praise we can get out of it, call us back to Thee. When, in our work, we fall in love with what we earn ... when, delighted with Creation, we begin to love created things more than Thee ... when, gloriously in love, we forget the source and wellsprings from which it comes to bless us – O God, tune our hearts again to Thy Spirit, and call us back to Thee.

In the name of the One whose love is mightier than our sins, we pray it. And grant also that we may ourselves hear this prayer – and that as Thou answers it, we may remember and rejoice. Through Christ Jesus our Lord, we pray. Amen.

HUNGER FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS AND BE MERCIFUL

Finally we come to a beatitude that says what it means and means what it says. The trouble this time is that it means and says too much: *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”* Clearly we do not have righteousness, or we would not hunger and thirst for it. Obviously we would not be thrilled at the thought of being satisfied with righteousness, if we already had it. We do not escape the second chapter of Genesis. This is a broken realm. Alienation and separation from God, and from the will of God, is our condition and situation in this world. However, if we truly hunger and thirst for righteousness, at least we know what we want – at least we know what direction we want to go in. Until we awaken spiritually, we do not even know that.

“Righteousness,” then, is one of the huge words – one of the huge concepts. It really does mean, at its height, the rightness of God: being in tune with – being part of – God’s WAY and purpose and will; matching or fitting with the way God is, with the way God makes things and does things, and with what God continues to move toward. Apart from God (faith and belief in God) there is no possibility of “right” – of being right or of doing right. This is not a proof of the existence of God, but it is a thing we should mention to atheist and agnostic friends, since they so frequently miss it or try to sidestep it. If there is no God, then “self-will run riot” is the highest and best we can hope for.

You have heard the old phrase about being caught between a rock and a hard place? Well, that is pitiful and minor in comparison to this dilemma. If there is no God, then there is no meaning or purpose to anything, anywhere. Nothing will last long enough to matter; striving is only something we do as a natural instinct, until we get our bearings and figure out that it is pointless. But the jump from there to meaning, to purpose, to design ... is a jump to the Designer – to God. What kind of God? Some of you have skipped, or tried to skip, most of the categories our ancestors struggled with: evil, cruel, benevolent, indifferent, distant, hungry, angry, and so on. You all claim to believe that God is loving. But many people today do not seem to realize what an enormous assumption that is, or where it came from. All of us discover that despite our sincere assumptions and faith, on occasion we go back to some of the old assumptions, and then fear wells up from some primordial pool within

us. Maybe God really *is* mean. Maybe God is punishing us. Maybe God will throw us into some burning pit of anguish and torment in the end – like so many of our loving Christian brothers and sisters try to tell us.

In any case, if you end up believing in a God of love, then righteousness – getting in tune with, trying to match, trying to cooperate with, trying to be part of the rightness of this God – is absolutely necessary, absolutely impossible, and absolutely desirable. It brings us to utter despair – or to a great and beautiful HOPE based on the very God from whence it comes.

We are suddenly deep into Christian theology: Justification by faith. Being given a righteousness – a rightness we in no way deserve – because, in trust, we open ourselves and allow God to come be with us. Strange to speak of our *allowing* the omnipotent God to do anything. But God does not believe in rape. “*You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all of your heart.*” (Jeremiah 29:13) We *do* have to want The Presence with us. Nevertheless, our only hope is trusting in God – turning to God utterly. Then the love of God will draw us to him, and the rightness of God will rub off on us more and more, by sheer association. The relationship will change us, because of who and what and how God is – not because we are able to get it right or do it right by any merit or ability we can muster apart from him. And we do not have to get right or be perfect before God is willing to establish and maintain this relationship, despite the fact that most religions have thought and taught just the opposite throughout most of human history, including (too often) our own. The hope is in what will happen to us *because* of the relationship we have with God. The hope is not that we can ever get good enough to be worthy or right or heroic enough, or to accomplish enough, so that God will come to us and say, “You have earned a spot by my side. I can now accept and tolerate you, whereas before you were not worthy of my friendship.” That is no longer our truth, though humans have a tendency to keep returning to where they started, despite all that Jesus and His best apostles can do and say to change our hearts and our perspective.

Doubtless you have recognized my attempts to access a little “Pauline Theology.” And some people keep wanting to claim that it is “merely” Pauline Theology and has nothing to do with what Jesus thought or taught. Of course, to keep Jesus out of it, they also have to say that the Crucifixion was merely Jesus getting caught and killed by a totalitarian regime (the Roman Empire), and the Resurrection was a construct of wishful thinking which developed over the next several generations

after Jesus' death. That is a perfectly legitimate position to hold from outside the church – by agnostics. It's a free country. God grants us free will. Nobody is required to believe anything, and besides, compulsory belief is a contradiction in terms. God does not believe in rape. God woos us with enormous patience and unimaginable caring, generation after generation.

But if you choose to take the Christian Life seriously – if you choose to come into the church, *not* to swallow everything or anything whole, but because you are drawn, like so many of us have been from the beginning, drawn to the power and wonder of the God who chooses to reveal himself in Jesus Christ – then at least you read and study the records with some desire to comprehend what is being told and brought to us.

If Paul “made up” Pauline Theology, then this beatitude would read: “Blessed are those who love righteousness and who decide to be righteous.” Actually, that is how a lot of people *hear* this beatitude. But that is a far cry from what it says. It says: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ...*” It is a great longing – a great passion, a hope, a vision – which draws us, and one we are never anywhere close to achieving. That is the very essence of how it is put.

So yes, of course, we move toward what we hunger and thirst for in every way we can. We are never content with the amount or degree of righteousness we achieve or display here. It is ever partial and incomplete, and laced with attitudes and motives that have not yet surrendered to Christ. “Shall be satisfied” is a future claim – unlike the promise of the first beatitude. True righteousness will never be realized in this realm, in this dimension. We taste moments of it; we act rightly from time to time, and the inner glow fuels our motives and warms our hearts, simply because the connection with God feels so wonderful. And even before we are through gloating, if we are not very careful, we become unrighteous again.

About twenty years ago, our denomination held its General Synod meeting in St. Louis. At that same time, as it happened, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers of America were in a serious confrontation with the Teamsters' Union. Some people involved in that struggle had been beaten and one person was rumored dead, though I never heard that officially confirmed. It was a confrontation between strikers and strikebreakers. Strange that it was taking place between two “Unions,” but that is a bigger subject than I intend here. Some of the leaders of the

UCC thought it would be a good opportunity for our denomination to make a public witness of our hunger for righteousness. They chartered a plane and sent a planeload of the Synod delegates from St. Louis to the Coachella Valley to march beside the Farm Workers on their picket lines. The day was full of tension and fear. It was also hot, and there had been no time for training or preparations. I think that if the State Police had not shown up in force, there would have been real bloodshed. At the end of the day, the weary delegates boarded the plane and headed back to St. Louis. But the airline had also put its flight together in haste, so there was only one flight attendant on the plane, and insufficient supplies. The planeload of Christian delegates – eager to risk life and limb for justice and peace – turned ugly, unreasonable, threatening, insulting, and incredibly rude to the poor flight attendant who could not supply all of us with drinks fast enough to suit us. We could not remember to go on hungering for righteousness through a single day – though supposedly we had devoted the day to that purpose at considerable risk, expense, and inconvenience. Our denomination has always been very proud of that grandstand play. I am ashamed of us to this day. Perhaps some of the Farm Workers were pleased that we supported them for a few hours of their many long years of struggle. But I also suspect that an airline flight attendant and perhaps her friends were turned off hard toward Christianity and the church that same day.

Of course, deeds of righteousness *will* come from a love of righteousness. Never enough, but many deeds will come from hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The first step must still come first: Admit we are powerless. The source is God, or righteousness is a mask for pride and domination, no matter how many pretty words we pour over it or how much good we try to claim comes from it. Deeds of mercy ... helping people ... defending, protecting, encouraging, lifting up ... whenever we can, in every way we can – that is rightly what we associate with deeds of righteousness. But that is not nearly all of it. And I say this because it is the huge overemphasis of the liberal church in our time. If we *never* do such things, then hungering and thirsting for righteousness is clearly a pretense – a sham. But in the liberal church of our time, helping others has become an alternative – a substitute – for living the Christian Life ourselves. It is good to feed the hungry, but what about personal honesty and integrity – in the workplace, in the home, in the school? What about giving value for value? And keeping our promises? What about having annual meetings in all our conferences across the land, and General Synod gatherings too, and making sweeping resolutions on all the social

issues of our time ... when back home we do not pray, tithe, read the Bible, love each other, or keep any of the spiritual disciplines that would back up what we say, and maybe even keep our churches from dwindling and dying? The tail wags the dog. The cart is before the horse.

Righteous deeds flow from the connection with God. “Out of the heart,” Jesus keeps telling us. We cannot fix it from the outside in. “But it’s too slow!” we cry. “If we have to wait until we all grow and change and truly give our hearts to God, it will be too late!” Of course it’s too late. We all know that. Satan tells us so: There is no eternal life. Be in a hurry. Cheat. Nobody will ever find out. To hell with God – let’s fix the world ourselves. Never mind humility. Never mind the first step.

If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, if we love Jesus, if we accept the offered relationship with God, then *of course* we try to move our own lives toward the rightness of God. What could stop us? After we have mourned – gotten in touch with ourselves – we take specific action to clean up some of the debris – to get closer and stay closer to right and just behavior in our own lives. In the twelve-step program, the eighth step reads: “*Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*” For many of us, it takes a while before our remorse becomes clear enough to move us past our embarrassment and shame, so that we actually try to repair some of the damage we have done. The twelve-step program makes a special step about becoming willing to make amends. The ninth step is about making the amends themselves. The tenth step is about constantly checking our love of righteousness, and moving back toward righteousness.

The Beatitudes, like the twelve-step program, are a WAY of life, if we choose it. It is not mere theory. We are never finished. We do not arrive. We do not achieve the goal. We live toward it with the Holy Spirit of an exceedingly loving God by our side. But we make progress, and that is enough to keep us grateful and eager in the pilgrimage.

* * *

I do not have time to actually preach on the fifth beatitude: “*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*” Besides, you are eager by now to do one for yourselves, right? Some will say that it’s because I know nothing about this beatitude. Yet they still live.

Perhaps a few fast comments do not constitute preaching. Mercy, by definition, is undeserved. Forgiveness is also undeserved. What is the difference between mercy and forgiveness?

True forgiveness, though undeserved, requires repentance. Forgiveness is something we desperately need and want – something we ask for, even beg for. Forgiveness restores a broken relationship. Forgiveness puts us back to some place we have fallen from.

Mercy comes seemingly out of nowhere – it comes as a surprise, even a shock – and lifts us to where we have never been, and treats us as we never expected to be treated. Mercy often does for us things we were not even aware that we needed until after we have received them. Mercy expects nothing in return. Mercy has no requirements, and in fact, it acts before we are conscious enough to expect it or see it coming. Mercy is a surprise, and it is not a constant, steady condition. That is, it may come again and again, but it strikes – does what good it can – and departs. If it comes again, that has no predictable connection to the time before. If you can expect it or demand it, it is not mercy. If you can count on it, it is not mercy. We have a phrase, “He begged for mercy.” What he should have begged for, first, was a vocabulary lesson. What he really meant was forgiveness.

Mercy is beyond rightness, beyond justice. Jesus ups the ante to a level almost beyond comprehension (though that is His trademark): You have received mercy from God. Sometimes, when you can manage it, be merciful to others. There is no hint here that you will receive mercy back from those to whom you give it. That would imply a transaction, a bargain, a deal – completely incongruous with the meaning of mercy. If you forgive someone, you are stuck with them – you have restored the relationship. Mercy can be “hit and run.” Drop this huge goodness or benefit on them, then take off and let them deal with it any way they can. The Good Samaritan did not show forgiveness to the man who lay robbed and beaten by the side of the road. He showed him mercy – unexpected, undeserved, out of the blue, no strings attached.

So if mercy, by definition, has no bargain, transaction, or deal quality about it, why does Jesus say that if we show mercy, we will obtain mercy? Doesn't that sound like tit-for-tat? Does it make you wide-eyed with wonder? Does it surprise you that Jesus would make a careless statement like that – a thoughtless connection between categories which do not match? Well, it does not surprise most people. It's in The Book! You cannot doubt it, so why think about it? Just “believe” it, whether it means anything or makes any sense or not.

Yet Jesus' stories, teachings, and sayings are full of just such strange constructs. It's like He is always fishing – always saying, “Bite on the paradox, and let it lift you into the next dimension.” I am not trying to persuade you of anything; we are nowhere near any empirically provable material. Just a couple of hints: It is the nature of God to be merciful. We have not always known that, but Jesus frequently claims and proclaims it. So, partly this beatitude suggests that if we play with mercy, the merciful God resonates and responds to that. But many of us have received mercy from God, and long before we were merciful ourselves. Why the implication that if we are merciful, God's mercy to us will increase? Especially when we know that it cannot be a payoff or a reward. I mean, God does pay off and God does reward. (Jesus loves to tell us, “Great is your reward in heaven.” Jesus has no hang-ups about being mercenary, politically incorrect, or “above it all.” He just says, “If you want to take a bribe, get the big one from the best source of all.”) But mercy, by definition, cannot be a payoff or a reward. Wrong category.

It is an eerie hint, one we get a number of times from Jesus. We shield, protect ourselves, ward ourselves off from God. God is always trying to give us more than we will receive. Lots of the time, we will not let it through. That has a lot to do with why Jesus came in the first place. But in order to be merciful, you have to drop the shields and barriers for a little bit. You have to drop your guard in order to let mercy flow. Opinions about justice, deserving, return on investment, what is fair, all the other people with needs and what is fair to them, what the results will be ... mercy cannot flow with any of that stuff in place. Mercy operates in a whole different spectrum. It's kind of like a Klingon warship. You have to drop the cloak of invisibility in order to fire. Only, in this case, you have to drop the cloak of logic and accountability in order to send or receive the mercy.

So if you drop your shields around God, it is an opportunity for God to hit you with blessings you would not let through before. “*Blessed are the merciful ...*” for while they are trying to get undeserved blessings through to others, God is ready with some moves of his own. There is an old saying, deep in the tradition: “You can never outgive God.” Jesus is one of the few humans who ever truly knew it, believed it, and trusted it. Actually, the *way* He knew it, believed it, and trusted it is what made a lot of us start wondering what manner of human He really was, and if maybe He was more than just a normal human ... since the rest of us do not fully know it, believe it, or trust it.

PURITY OF HEART

We have stressed the necessity of taking the first step first. The first beatitude – the humility stance, the acceptance of our absolute need for God – is not only a life-changing blessing in its own right, but it is prerequisite to all the other beatitudes. The rest of them cannot work right – do not end up in blessing – without the first one already in place. This is important for all of us to keep remembering, but if you are coming into our Lenten theme in the middle, I beg you to at least refer to the first sermon in the series, “Poor In Spirit.”

Our English word “blessed,” or “blessing,” is a powerful term. If you say of someone, “That person has been a real blessing in my life,” that is a strong statement. Nevertheless, I think the word “blessed” (*makarios*) does not carry for us the emotional power intended here. It became popular in the '60s and '70s to translate “blessed” into “happy.” We ran around saying, “Happy are the peacemakers. Happy are the meek.” Kind of like trying to drive a B-17 with the propeller from a beanie cap.

The opposite of blessed is not “unhappy,” though it does move in that direction. The opposite of blessed is “cursed” – blighted, out of the plan, out of the Kingdom. *Makarios* is the distinctive, you-can't-get-it-anywhere-else JOY of participation in God's Kingdom – being in it – being part of it. *Makarios* was often contrasted with a false, temporary, worldly happiness. God effects a reversal of our values. The Beatitudes are far beyond the shallow, temporal rewards of this world. By the way, lots of propaganda notwithstanding, they do not necessarily fight each other. They often coexist. Just because you have good health or a responsible job or considerable financial resources does not automatically mean that you do not love and serve God. But the Beatitudes are beyond the temporal world and its values. The world cannot give them to you. And if God gives them to you, the world cannot take them away. It is one of the saddest and greatest moments of all time: the discovery that our crucifying Jesus did not mean that He was no longer the Son of God.

Spiritual principles are dangerous if they are not dedicated and devoted to God. Nowhere is that more true and clear than with the sixth beatitude. Intensity, focus, and single-minded purpose are at the root of the greatest evil, as well as the greatest good. The SS troops of the Third

Reich had a great deal in common with the Jesuits in their heyday – the devotion and discipline were very similar. The difference was in whom and what they served.

So as we talk about the second greatest of the Beatitudes, let us be particularly mindful of how very dependent it is upon the first, and how dangerous it is without the first. We want to be love-based rather than fear-based, but I do think we should be very fearful of the abuse or misuse of our gifts, and we should teach our children to be too. This is not a common awareness in our society. But it is one of the curses – one of the greatest misfortunes – when we misuse, abuse, or fail to use the gifts that God gives us.

I am not talking about doing anything perfectly. But it is possible to grow up in our culture and get clear through school, and even church, and never be clearly told that one of the greatest misfortunes in life is to use your gifts and abilities for your own purposes – for your own ends. “I did it myself,” “It’s for me,” “I am successful” are relatively common and socially acceptable attitudes.

Do you remember the saying, “Whoever created your intelligence, *you* didn’t”? Well, whoever created your other skills, gifts, or abilities, *you* didn’t. We can train, develop, fine tune, and devote our gifts, but none of them were our idea to start with. So if we are going to talk about purity of heart – the very thing that will bring our gifts to their apex – let us be very clear, lest our gifts become the source of our deepest sorrow and greatest sin. Our gifts were given to us that we may serve God and his Kingdom. If we do not dedicate and devote them to this end, we are in the enemy camp.

God does not appreciate it when we use the gifts he gave us to hurt people, to weaken or oppose his authority, or to do damage to the Kingdom. Sometimes this awareness makes us want to “sit it out,” to make sure we do no harm. But neither does God appreciate it when we let the gifts lie fallow, go unused. Jesus’ parable of the talents is a devastating indictment of trying to play it safe. So we are caught. We have to acknowledge, train, develop, dedicate, and use our abilities – for God – in some way ... or we live blighted, empty, complaint-filled lives.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” The imagery is pretty clear, unless we want to be obtuse – and sometimes, sadly, I do.

I got away with it with some of my teachers in school, and it is hard not to try to pull it off with God. Technically, we could argue that the “heart” is not the center or core of our inner being, that it is not the seat of our motives or emotions. But it has long been used to symbolize these very things. Occasionally I discover after a sermon that I am still speaking to a few literalists – some fundamentalist and some scientific. Anyway, worshipping the Lord your God with all of your heart means more than saying “Thank you” for the blood-pumping muscle that keeps you alive. Not that it is wrong to be thankful for that as well. May both layers of heart-meaning be strong within you.

“Purity” was another one of those special concepts in ancient times. Purity was power. Unmixed with other things, something pure could express the full essence of itself. Purity was wisdom. Untroubled by doubts, mixed motives, or conflicting ideas, it could see clearly, and sometimes far into the future. It was no longer double-minded.

Gold was the first metal that humans learned to make pure. They could smelt it – melt it and keep scraping away all the impurities until they had “pure gold.” You can still feel that phrase crackle inside a little, even if you do not remember why. “It is pure gold.” Why would you want your king to wear a crown of gold? It had nothing to do with wealth or greed. That came later, and is picayune in comparison. You wanted your king to wear a crown of gold so that the properties of purity would transfer from the crown to his head – so that he would have wisdom and power; so that he would see clearly, make just judgments, and be strong – that the kingdom and its people might prosper. Purity was the key. Without purity, what chance could there be? Most of the kings of the earth, despite their crowns, were not pure. We have the devastation to prove it.

Why is a wedding ring – the symbol and seal of the wedding vows – made of gold? Figure it out. Some people have not figured it out yet. They think there is something wrong with marriage, when in fact, unknowingly, they have not yet given it a chance.

“Purity of heart is to will one thing.” Søren Kierkegaard titled one of his books with this phrase. Purity of heart is to will one thing. Jesus said to Martha: “*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; only one thing is necessary.*” (Luke 10:41) *Blessed are the pure in heart: blessed are you when the will within you – the core and center of your feelings, motives, desires, and purposes – has been smelted: melted*

and processed until all the impurities, all the extraneous stuff, all the secondary goals and desires, good or bad, have been scraped away. When the heart is pure, its only *desire* is to love and serve God. Its only *purpose* is to love and serve God. Integration. All the inner warfare resolved. All parts of the whole working toward the same end.

Then, of course, the pure in heart see more clearly how to love others, and how to engage in many things in this world without the heart wavering from its true purpose. And God backs and supports the gifts with power. From the outside, we watch in amazement and think we are seeing miracles. Mother Teresa was so human we thought she was inhuman. Paul was so focused we could barely believe it. Jeremiah seemed like the purist gold in the Old Testament, but maybe it was because he was handed such a harsh assignment. And Jesus? Was Jesus pure in heart? Whenever I start to realize the magnitude of it – begin to grasp it – I am so overwhelmed, so overcome, that I cannot contain the gratitude, the admiration, the wonder.

Before we leave this brief introduction of the sixth beatitude and you go to your own Lenten contemplation for the rest of the week, I want to remind you of what an important place this imagery had in Jesus' teachings. The Beatitudes bring it to its apex, but Jesus often reminded us of the importance of the heart, and how it controls everything for good or for evil. He was constantly telling us: "You cannot fix it from the outside in. It must be fixed from the inside out." That is why Christianity puts such emphasis on conversion, on being born anew, on being saved, on trusting the Savior. The heart must be changed or none of the rest can follow. Our world is always focused on changing the outside. Naturally. What else would you expect from the world? Christianity is a profound and uncompromising alternative to that approach. First the heart, *then* the deed. If we get to the deed first, Satan will always twist it to a different purpose.

Just a few quotations for those who think I might be exaggerating: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man" (Matthew 15:19-20) "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man." (Mark 7:21-23) "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth

speaks. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” (Matthew 12:34-35) “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.” (Matthew 13:15) “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45)

Why will the pure in heart see God? “*Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened unto you.*” (Matthew 7:7) But aside from that – and aside from the next realm – there is something small yet very meaningful to me. I had a friend, years ago, named Lorraine Washburn. Her husband was one of my dearest friends, and I only knew Lorraine because I loved Channing. But one day when I was waiting for Channing to finish up with a patient so we could go play, Lorraine and I got to talking about painting. Now, “art” is one of the things that got left out of my gene pool. My theory is: If you don’t have a camera, you should at least paint it as close to a photograph as possible. Even if you do have a camera, you would be better off reading a book. But Lorraine and I started talking about painting. For a few minutes, we got nowhere. Then she just stopped, and started describing to me what she was seeing outside the window. I thought it was just their backyard, but for a little while Lorraine let me see that backyard through her eyes. It had color and shadow and light and shape and patterns I had never seen or noticed in all my life. Lorraine had devoted years of love and energy to a gift God had given her, and so every day she “saw” a whole world that I looked at but did not see.

The promise of seeing God is a future promise. But it is also true that the pure in heart wake up every morning to a world full of God, a world that bears the marks and traces of God’s presence everywhere. Does that make it worth going through the smelting? We shall see.

THE PEACEMAKERS & THE PERSECUTED

Many of you have taken our Lenten theme to heart, and you have pondered, prayed, and tried to build the Beatitudes more deeply into your way of thinking and being. I do not have to tell you how deep are the blessings or how true the promises. To my personal dismay, I note that today must close our series of sermons on the Beatitudes. Next week is Palm Sunday. I do hope it will become clearer to you than ever before how the WAY of Life embodied in the Beatitudes inevitably leads Jesus to the events of Holy Week. He does not just talk and teach – He lives it! He lives it more truly and completely than any other human who ever came here. Some of His better followers pick up the shape and form of His Way of Life as well, but in comparison to Jesus, they always seem to have a lot of haze around the edges. Some of *us* have so much haze around the edges that it is hard to see if there is any of His shape and form to our lives at all – hard to be sure if we are actually followers of Jesus. As the old saw goes: “If you were arrested and charged with being a Christian, would there be evidence enough to convict you?” Could even a good prosecuting attorney make the charges stick?

In any case, there are only five Sundays in Lent, and there are nine Beatitudes shading into the Sermon on the Mount. Clearly I have had time to barely hint and point toward some of the wisdom contained in this, one of the deepest pools of Christian truth. It is nonetheless appropriate. We each have to go swim in the pool ourselves if we want baptism to be more than “water off a duck’s back.”

* * *

I hope you are not too weary of “vocabulary lessons.” I’m starting to feel like every Sunday I stand up here and tell you that the words we use do not mean what most people think they mean. The problem is, it’s true. I can’t bear sending you out of here thinking that Christianity is about what most people today think it’s about: being ignorant, poor, ineffective, and conciliatory; being a sucker for every shyster, and a dupe for every self-appointed religious entrepreneur; being scared half to death all the time that the loving Jesus will suddenly return, beat you up, and throw you into the flames, maybe because you didn’t get some of the wording right, or because you haven’t cleaned up all your hang-ups yet.

It is the power of the *words* that proclaim the “Good News” – or that keep turning it all ugly and wrong.

Any word can be ruined by poor or shallow usage, of course. A deep and profound “God bless you” can become so lazy and familiar that it turns into “goodbye.” It may even be punctuated with the slamming of a door. How strange. Jesus canceled out the concept of “goodbye.” No such thing can match with eternal life. But we have turned a blessing into the ultimate essence of sin (separation – rejection – alienation). Remember the barbershop group in *The Music Man*, singing, “How can there be any *sin* in *sincere* – what is the *good* in *goodbye*?” Well, *sincere* means “without wax,” and *goodbye* means “God bless ye.” And it makes it really hard to preach if we do not “speak the same language.” So some of you tease me about spending so much sermon time in vocabulary lessons and twisting the Christian Faith all around to something different than it is. But I am not the one who has Christianity all screwed around backward and upside down until it sounds like a vengeful, angry God on the one hand, or a shallow American success story on the other.

It is difficult, I think, for us non-Jews to comprehend what a Jewish teacher might mean by “peace” or “peacemakers.” Neither does the Greek word (*eirene*) carry the power of the Hebrew word (*shalom*). “*Blessed are the peacemakers*” can and has been used to refer to a vast array of different levels of “peace,” many of them almost the dead opposite of what this beatitude intends. How come I get to choose which level of peace it means? I do not, but I can ask you to notice the promise-end of the beatitude: “*for they will be called children of God.*” That, together with the context of the Sermon on the Mount and the laying out of the precepts and principles of the Christian Way of Life, does give me a right to suggest that *this* peace refers to the highest dimension of *shalom*: To be in tune with God. To be in synchronicity with God. To do all things in harmony with how things are made and created to work together. To have no warfare, conflict, argument, or disagreement between our inner being and God’s Being – God’s purpose, will, plans, actions. To be *with* instead of *against* God. *Shalom* at this level refers to the most beautiful, blessed, creative, productive, joyful, fulfilled “condition” that humans can imagine. Half the time we cannot imagine being in such total harmony with our chosen mate, never mind with God. Yet the soul longs, hungers, reaches out for such PEACE, UNITY, RELATIONSHIP. Grace is when we get to taste it, even though we have not earned or deserved it – a taste that beckons and encourages and leads us on.

You do realize, I presume, that Jesus lived in a time permeated with apocalyptic dreams and hopes and preaching. Rebel bands – Zealots – were always watching for a chance to throw the Romans out by guerrilla warfare. Patriotism, memory of the Maccabees, hunger for a new king like the mighty David – a Messiah who would come and defeat the Romans and restore freedom to Israel – Jesus lived in the middle of this incredible ferment ... and would have *nothing* to do with it! “Blessed are the peacemakers” *lost* Jesus a lot of followers.

A “peacemaker,” then, is one who works for God’s Kingdom – one who works for all things to be in unity and harmony with God. You see the problem? We are always reducing this particular beatitude into some seemingly authoritative argument to support our worldly agendas. Two friends are in a quarrel. You step into the middle, calm them both down, get them to talk more slowly and patiently, until all three of you are friends again, shaking hands, and liking each other. Presto! You are a “peacemaker.” Well, it’s better than a fistfight, and you would be glad if it came out that way, and so would I, and we suspect God would too. But does that have anything to do with this beatitude? What if neither friend is consciously trying to be in tune with God’s will? What if both are being utterly selfish, and the reconciliation comes because they realize they can help each other toward their selfish ends? Nothing wrong with that, *per se*. But what has it to do with God’s Kingdom? You are not a peacemaker, not in the category this beatitude is talking about, unless you are helping to reconcile people *with God* – helping people to find *peace with God* – helping people to walk toward and into the will and purpose and love that God has designed for them.

You can win the Nobel Peace Prize – even stop two warring nations from fighting and help them to sign a peace treaty that turns them into allies – and we would all rejoice, and doubtless God would be pleased by the cessation of hostilities, and still it would have no bearing, no connection, no relevance to the meaning of this beatitude. Nations can exist at war or at peace in this world and have no conscious awareness or intention to love or to serve God – to be at peace with God – to cooperate with God or to do God’s will.

The beatitude is about peace *with God*. It comes from a man who does not speak or think like we are used to. “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” (Matthew 10:34) “*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be*

five divided, three against two and two against three ...” (Luke 12:51, 52) “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27) “Jesus answered [Pilate], ‘My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.’” (John 18:36) Paul sums it up, as he often does: “All this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has enlisted us in this ministry of reconciliation: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (II Corinthians 5:18-19 REB)

This last, from Paul, is an exact restatement of the seventh beatitude. “Enlisted us in the ministry of reconciliation” and “Blessed are the peacemakers” are synonymous – they are total parallels. Only, God is not reconciling the world to *itself* – he is not patting it on the head and telling it that it’s just fine the way it is, or asking all the quarreling people to kiss and make up. Nobody and nothing in this world is right until it is right with God. Reducing “peacemaking” to a this-worldly harmony or a this-worldly caring that has no awareness – no living relationship with or obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – is a terrible travesty that leads not to blessing or being children of God, but toward false hope and ultimate despair. And nobody does that better, or more often, than liberal Christendom in our country today.

We are not the first to run into the problems and travail of wrestling with these distinctions. Who was “The Prince of Peace” and “The Son of God” in Jesus’ day? Augustus Caesar, of course. Who was the designer and the creator of the *Pax Romana* (the Peace of Rome)? Augustus Caesar, of course. He had brought peace (*eirene*, not *shalom*) to their whole world. The highways and the seas were safer than the world had ever imagined they could be. A merchant could now expect to get his caravan of goods from one city to another without having to hire a small army to accompany him. It was marvelous. People came down out of the great fortress strongholds, like Pergamum and Sardis, and lived and built towns right out in the open where there was water and easy access, and they did not have to spend hours every day hauling stuff to impregnable fortress strongholds. The Dow Jones was going through the roof, and irrigation canals, roads, temples, and whole cities were being built everywhere. The world had never experienced such prosperity. “Augustus Caesar! Augustus Caesar! Surely he is a god!” Can you imagine the wealth, the power of the Roman legions, the hubbub around vast and wealthy temples all over the world? “How do we know that Athena is the truest god and the best

church? Well, just look at all the people who go to worship there! Who has ever seen a grander temple?!”

Meanwhile Paul, Peter, and a handful of others were wandering around without escort or fanfare, without enough wealth to even buy candlesticks in any of the vast temples that served thousands of people in every city they visited. And they were talking to tiny pockets of people here and there. They talked about a Galilean carpenter, and a different kind of peace, and a Kingdom not of this world, and what happened to Him here. They were arrested, kicked around, and thrown into prison because, few and humble though they were, faith and love are very threatening subjects in this world, especially faith and love directed toward God. So they ended up dying for their efforts ... as He had before them. Only, the people they talked to could tell that the peace they spoke of was for real – something they really knew and lived for. And nobody could kill them fast enough to keep it from spreading.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.” Oh my friends, do not reduce this down to some picayune and trivial level of what this world calls “peace.” We can have peace with God in this world, but this world can neither give it nor take it away. If you want the blessing of being a “peacemaker,” do not reduce it down to something Jesus would not have walked across the street for. Jesus did not sell His life cheap, you know. He lived for the big stuff – the biggest there is.

* * *

It is the inevitable result of being peacemakers – in the truest sense – that we also become the persecuted. But again the dichotomy: Political causes can get you killed too. They are not necessarily or automatically for Jesus’ sake. And Jesus (fundamentalist and liberal Christendom notwithstanding) *refused* the political solution. In the wilderness temptations, a political solution was Satan’s second try, and Jesus answered him: *“It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”* (Luke 4:8)

To many, many people, this is the most troubling part of the Christian call. While we are still interested but on the outside looking in, it is troubling to realize that all the beautiful, wonderful, and appealing disciplines and concepts of the Christian Way of Life come with no guarantee in this world – are “in but not of” this world, are alongside of, but extra to, this world – so that sometimes they have great impact here,

but we never know if, or when. And if we go to complain to our Lord, He just smiles sadly and says, “Go read the story again.” We try to be faithful here, but *here* is not what it is about. It is better than that. It is bigger than that. If you reduce it to “here” – lock it down and try to understand it, trust it, or use it only for “here” – you will lose it all. *“Only if you lose your life for my sake will you find it.”*

But if we are going to quote, we might as well go back to the Beatitudes themselves. I put the last two together, for time’s sake. *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you falsely on my account.... Great is your reward in heaven.”* Not if you are reviled and persecuted – *when!* If you live the LIFE, it is inevitable – only a matter of time, and from time to time.

And we are back to the same promise as with the first beatitude: If you are persecuted for the Kingdom, you are in the Kingdom. No waiting. The reality and awareness of the Kingdom is now. Actually, this too is inevitable. That is, you cannot be persecuted for the Kingdom unless you are aware enough of its existence to get into trouble for it. And many of us are mature enough that we don’t want or need any more than the awareness of the Kingdom and the awareness of the Lord’s presence with us. That is quite sufficient to hook us and keep us. We are not interested in any further rewards or blessings. But Jesus doesn’t care much about our maturity. He insists that the rewards are great in Heaven. God is generous and full of blessing, and he loves to shower gifts on the children – whether we like it or not – in this world and in the next. But the gifts are not always the gifts of this world. They are better than that.

In any case, our problem is getting used to the notion that LOVE brings suffering in this world. We understand punishment for mistakes, crimes, and blunders, and sometimes even the pain of natural laws working in the way they always do. But Jesus ends the Beatitudes by reminding us of what is coming if we are faithful – if we live the LIFE He invites us into: **If we have peace with God, animosity with this world is inevitable – because this world is not at peace with God.** I don’t say it as often as you think I do; you just don’t like to hear it. And I don’t like to hear it any more than you do. But there is no escaping the principle, from one end of the Scriptures to the other, and in all our experiences of actually living the WAY.

Some Christians are always scaring themselves and each other with concepts of Hell. It is one of the foolish aberrations. They get stuck on the imagery, and lose the very point of the passages they read. Do souls fear flames? Hell is not about “hot.” It is about ALONE. You do not have to die before you experience it. You do not have to die before you experience the love of God, either.

So what *should* we be scaring ourselves about? We should be scaring ourselves about minimizing God’s presence with us; about minimizing how much we love God; about pretending Jesus’ Way is not as important to us as it really is. We do it so we can keep out of trouble here; so we don’t offend people here; so we don’t risk losing friends or jobs or the cooperation we need from others in order to be successful here. It is one of our most closely guarded secrets. We keep hoping God knows it – how much we love him – even if we are afraid to ever mention it, even to ourselves. But consciously or subconsciously we know: if our love for God starts to show very much, the world will descend upon us. It is the one thing the world fears more than any other. So Jesus tries to prepare us: *“Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.”* (Luke 6:26) Have we admitted that there is a difference between being people-pleasers and being God-pleasers? *“Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”* (John 12:42-43)

Get ready. Never be surprised. Never let dislike, mockery, rejection, false blame, or persecution throw you off course. It is predictable – to be expected. That is partly why it is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day. We have to keep clearing it up. When are we catching flak from friend or foe because we are in the wrong or are being bratty, stubborn, greedy, or whatever – and when are we catching flak because we are doing precisely what we are supposed to be doing, right where God put us, for this very reason?

At the core of our religion, there stands a cross. Among many, many things, it says that serving the God of love – and being truly loving – does not always mean you will be loved back ... at least not at first.

“Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake.” Are some of us missing a very big, very special, and incredible blessing?