

Connecting With the Sunday Readings

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

One day the pastor of a Catholic church was visited by a sign salesman. He was selling Ten Commandment signs to be displayed in front of churches. The pastor said he was not interested in a sign with the Ten Commandments since there were already many of them in his town. He said, however, that he would like a sign listing the Eight Beatitudes. Did the sign-maker have one of those? He did not.

Today we listen to Matthew's rendering of the Beatitudes. We have heard them before. Often they are used as a launching pad for a homily on the importance of becoming poor, meek, merciful, and so forth. The homily is given as a lesson in moral living. There is nothing wrong with advocating that we can all be less attached to material possessions, poor in spirit, more patient by seeking meekness and more forgiving of others through mercy. Clearly, the Beatitudes advocate living according to the morality prescribed in the Gospels. But the Beatitudes are not about changing one's life. Rather they are a declaration of living in God's Kingdom. They note that living in poverty, being meek in the face of attack, and forgiving those who have hurt us, bring us right now into the blessedness of God's Kingdom.

A Gospel Word for the Home

Matthew 5:1–12a

Let's examine this by focusing on the first Beatitude, being "poor in spirit." In some ways, putting this Beatitude first indicates its importance. In the time of Jesus, most people were poor. They lived, as we say, from hand to mouth. Food was always scarce and even possessing money of any kind was not common. But being poor also carried a kind of stigma. Some said it was a sign of disfavor before God. They were not "blessed" with riches. Even today, some Christian groups equate worldly success with God's favor. God, they believe, rewards the good with all kinds of goods.

Jesus wanted to alter that perspective. Being poor, especially when one's poverty touched one's very spirit, placed one in a good position to understand dependence of God. The poor often are the most generous in sharing what little they have with others in need. The Church recognizes those who have voluntarily given up riches by taking a vow of poverty. Parents will sometimes comment that while they have not taken the vow of poverty, they live it. Being poor can open one to be filled with God's Spirit and with a generous heart that serves others. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew substitutes the word "heaven" for God because he is writing for converted Jews who did not use that word.)

The second Beatitude notes the blessedness of mourning. Why is "mourning" considered an indicator that one is living the Kingdom life? To mourn is to be vulnerable to human pain and suffering. Sometimes one mourns for oneself, but given the altruistic orientation of the Gospels, Jesus here is most likely pointing to the act of mourning for others. Allowing oneself to be touched by the difficulties endured by others is an expression of empathy. This ability to feel another's pain is a sure sign of being open and connected with others. It is a sign of genuine love of neighbor.

And in being empathetic, we can be comforted in knowing that we are exactly where God's wants us to be. We have connected with others and that's a primary way to gain a connection with God. "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted." There you have it. The Beatitudes each show how Jesus clearly knows who we are on the inside. And that's where the Kingdom is found. So poorness is not a sign of being alienated from God, nor is being mournful a sign of human weakness. No, they can be (it's not automatic because they can also create an attitude of self pity) powerful indicators that we are right where we should be, deeply immersed in the blessedness of God.

Parent Survival

Do any of the Beatitudes touch on parenting? In a sense they all do, but let's focus on the last one, "Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." How are parents persecuted? If most parents are asked this question, they will quickly list ten or more ways that their children persecute them. Remember that there would be many aspects and meanings of the Beatitudes. Let's look at parental persecution (a possible book title?) with some examples.

The dictionary describes persecution as oppressing someone with ill-treatment. Do children ever threaten their parents with ill-treatment? How about the nagging request for the newest toy advertised on TV? How about the demand to go to a teen party where you are uncertain about whether it will be safe? How about the excessive noise that comes from your child's music? The list is endless with ways parents can be said to suffer persecution. That's not to enter into a debate of whether the source of persecution is good or bad. And let's assume that the matter is something good (at least from the child's perspective) and therefore "righteous." The fact is that children's lives infiltrate those of parents and they are often experienced by parents as ill-treatment. It's often something that we would prefer didn't happen. Parents expose their lives to persecution on the day the child arrives. It's the nature of the game. And it's part of life in God's crazy Kingdom.

Car or Meal Talk

As a family, read the Eight Beatitudes slowly and ask among yourselves which Beatitude most speaks to each individual in the family.

-by David Thomas, PhD, Co-Director, The Bethany Family Institute

One-Line Prayer

Jesus, Bless our family as we seek to live as members of your Kingdom here today. Amen.