

## Beatitudes as Spiritual Steps

Today is the feast of All Saints!

Today is the day when we remember the saints in our lives who have moved on to new glories in God's nearer presence.

And it's also the day to stop for a moment.

To take stock of where we the living find ourselves in our own spiritual journey.

To help us with that "look see" we are given the great grace of our gospel lesson, the reading of what has come to be known as the Beatitudes; the Blessings.

And if you've ever spent any time with these blessings, the first thing you may think is how weird it is to call such things "blessings."

Poverty of spirit?

Mourning?

Meekness?

Hunger and thirst?

Really Jesus?

And for the longest time, these blessings seem to be a kind of random collection of life's circumstances, unconnected to one another.

Until we sit with them for awhile.

And what emerges is that these life circumstances aren't random at all!

Rather, they're steps along the way to what we might call spiritual maturity.

Much like 12 step programs, which lay out a path to wholeness, the Beatitudes seem to do exactly the same thing.

Which, I think, is why Jesus begins by blessing what he calls being "poor in spirit."

Which is another way of saying: we need to get out of our ego self before we can connect with our true self.

Jesus mirrors this first step in his own life.

As soon as he's baptized by John in the Jordan, where does he go?

He goes to the desert — the place that actually and symbolically represents emptiness, stillness, the surrender of self.

And there he stays for 40 days.

Bible-speak for "a very long time."

It's the place where he confronts not only **his** demons, but **ALL** demons.

And it's to the desert that we are each of us called to begin our own spiritual journey.

"Poor in spirit" means realizing — I can't do it on my own!

"Poor in spirit" is that very first step in cracking open the hard shell of the ego, which, at least for me, is a very tough nut to crack!

Perhaps that's why the second step, the second blessing, invites us into mourning.

Loss, whether of a spouse to cancer, a child to an accident, a marriage; even a job or one's reputation, seems to be a necessary pathway to spiritual maturity.

Mourning is a step beyond spiritual poverty, because mourning is a consequence of control not being **surrendered** by us — but control being **ripped from** our grasp.

Mourning creates a more radical emptying.

It is unwanted.

It is uninvited.

And yet it appears.

And when it's at its worst, it seems to be the farthest thing from a blessing that we can ever imagine.

And yet, mourning is vital to entering the next necessary step in spiritual maturity.

Mourning helps us to become meek.

Because mourning rips away our illusions of control.

We begin to see that we are not "all that."

We begin to understand the story of the woodsman who takes his only son on a hunt, only to have the boy killed by a wild animal.

When he returns home, heart broken, he asks his wife to take a pot from door to door throughout the village, and ask from every family who **never** suffered tragedy, to fill the pot with food.

The wife returns after making those rounds.

The pot is still empty.

And so the woodsman tells his wife, neither have we escaped tragedy, as he tells her of the death of their son.

To become meek is to recognize our solidarity in suffering with one another.

It's to realize that even if suffering hasn't yet entered our door, most likely it will, before all is said and done.

Meekness comes when we remember that but for the grace of God, we are all of us nothing more than walking piles of future dirt; but for the grace of God.

Meekness allows us to face the sharp elbows of our neighbors and fellow citizens with a sense of compassion and understanding — if for no other reason than the deep knowledge that we are none of us getting out of this life alive.

But make no mistake!

Meekness doesn't mean weakness.

Indeed, the fruit of meekness, genuinely lived, is a thirst for justice and peace and reconciliation in this world.

When a news article last week told of a group of Black men who are arming themselves in response to so much police and white supremacist violence, my first reaction was to marvel that the Black community has NOT resorted to violence for all these many years of oppression and vicious racism.

As a community, our Black brothers and sisters demonstrate over and over again a profound understanding of meekness that leads to the creation of a just and peaceful and reconciled community.

Whether it's the civil rights movement of the mid 20th century or Black Lives Matter today, the overwhelmingly non-violent insistence that our social structures and social attitudes change — reflects the truth that meekness gives birth to a thirst for righteousness.

And that thirst can only be satisfied with our next step along the way: the embrace of mercy.

Vengeance only begets vengeance.

Hate only begets hate.

But mercy, the off-spring of compassion, provides a new fertile ground, from which seeds of harmony can blossom.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" leaves the whole world toothless and blind.

But mercy creates the possibility of a new beginning.

And when we live in a state of mercy; toward others, even toward ourselves, the venom which used to poison our relations seeps away, and a purity of heart emerges, the next to last step on our spiritual journey.

And lo and behold, what is the natural consequence of a pure heart, but to become peacemakers?

It's the natural consequence because we begin to see that the anger and hate and prejudice in this world is most often not a consequence of some kind of pure evil —but rather the consequence of other people's pain.

It is nearly always the case that those who lash out do so from a place of deeply buried anxieties, long forgotten abuse, abandonment and rejection.

And when we can see what first seemed to be nothing more than hateful bile is in fact the pus of still festering wounds, we can approach the wounded one with antiseptic and understanding, rather than fleeing or fighting back.

Once we arrive at this last step of spiritual maturity, Jesus is quick to remind us that not all will be wine and roses — at least not in this life.

The person who comes to the place of being a peacemaker; a place that encompasses all of the previous steps, is certain to experience enormous pushback from the powers that be in this world.

Such people are a direct threat to a world which worships power, privilege, fame and fortune.

Such people are also a threat to the cosmic forces that are the wellspring for so much of what is evil in our world.

And so we see assassinations of folks like Martin Luther King, Jr, of Gandhi, and of lesser known countless others, like the Jesuit priests and Maryknoll Missioners in El Salvador, not to mention the innumerable indigenous people murdered by the forces of greed and oppression.

Others are jailed, like the elderly folks who broke into a nuclear weapons base, pouring their own blood on these idols of destruction.

Like our own Jim Albertini, who's spent a lifetime in the fields of peacemaking, and many years behind bars for doing so.

Yet they have all of them remembered:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Today, where are you in your spiritual journey?

And are you ready for the next step?

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