

Why The Beatitudes Matter

If you ask my kids what does dad read, you're guaranteed to get a big eye roll and a groan as they heave out that "Dad only reads stuff about God, and oh yeah, Jeeesus!"

But truth be told I am not quite that limited and just the other day was reading a movie review in The Atlantic magazine.

I've never preached about a movie in my life and I usually reserve my own eye rolls for priests who do; because Hollywood is really good at make believe but not so good with fundamental truth.

So imagine my surprise as I read through this movie review not of some up and coming blockbuster, but of a ten year old film that has long ago been sent packing to the Netflix warehouse.

Maybe you know it.

It's called Michael Clayton.

It stars George Clooney, who, until she got her new eyeglasses, Auntie Nancy would comment about my resemblance to George!

In the movie, Clooney plays a fixer for a giant law firm.

If a client has a problem, Clooney is sent out to bribe, bully or otherwise take care of the problem.

The problem he's facing today is that the firm's client, a big chemical company, makes the most popular form of weed killer, which is also

found to be killing people, with cancer; and a class action lawsuit has been filed.

Clooney is off to squash this problem.

Meanwhile, Arthur, a senior partner of this law firm has gone rogue; you see, his conscience finally catches up with him and he refuses to sleep with the corporate monsters any more.

Clooney is told to intercept the crazed man and get him back on track.

The two meet, and the senior partner says this to our friend George:

“I realized that I had emerged not through the doors of Kenner, Beck & Ledeen, not through the portals of our vast and powerful law firm, but from the rear end of an organization who’s sole function is to excrete the poison, the ammo, the **defoliant** necessary for other larger, more powerful organisms to destroy the miracle of humanity.”

The reviewer asks: “Is Arthur insane?”

Not at all.

His perceptions have a fine, religious clarity.

Pierce the everyday, deepen your sense of reality and the firm of Kenner Beck and Ledeen is a giant, squatting, toxin squirting organism.

We live surrounded by — ruled by — just such giant, squatting, toxin-squirting organisms.” J. Parker, The Atlantic, 11/20/17, 34.

Now why, you are surely asking, is he talking to us about giant, squatting, toxin-squirting organisms on this day when we celebrate our saints, when we hear Jesus extoll the blessings we call the beatitudes.

Well, I'll tell you.

Because our saints are here to remind us, as Jesus does in today's gospel, what it is in this life that really matters; a reminder that is desperately needed today in this era of nuclear brinkmanship, corporate engineered rollbacks of clean air and water, and the willingness in what today passes for Christianity to bless these horrors with the supposed blessing of Christ.

Just a couple of weeks ago the Rev James Jeffers of the Dallas Baptist mega church, was recounting that a Christian writer asked him if the president should embody the Sermon on the Mount.

Jeffers reply?

"Absolutely not!"

And herein lies our problem: we have exchanged the sermon on the mount for the wisdom of government, business and even church organizations who's sole function is to excrete the poison, the ammo, the **defoliant** necessary for other larger, more powerful organisms to destroy the miracle of humanity."

The opioid crisis that is sweeping up tens of thousands of lives was begun in the 1980s when a single family-owned pharmaceutical company decided to increase it's market share by bribing doctors and promoting false research about the need for and safety of opioid pain killers.

Oxycotin, that saw 300,000 doses in the mid-80s saw 6 million doses a decade later.

The Skakel family who created this epidemic is now worth billions, giving millions to the arts, but not a dime to drug rehab.

Blessed are the meek, the mourners, the hungry, the peacemakers, the merciful, the pure of heart...

And while Jesus says these words in **this** world, and lived them in **this** world, and suffered till the brutal end the **implications** of living the beatitudes in **this** world, we who count ourselves as his followers have not done the same.

What we have done over too many of the last two thousand years is consign the beatitudes to the next world, we have "Sunday-morning-ed" them.

We say, living the beatitudes, and the sermon on the mount, all that stuff about loving our enemies and not seeking revenge and walking the extra mile, all those ways of living that are created by purity and meekness and mercy, well, we shrug, it's totally unrealistic.

It doesn't account for the evil in the world, the baseness of humanity, the need to stand up to tyrants.

Except it does; if we, like the Lord we say we follow, are willing to accept loss and defeat and sometimes pain and sometimes death too.

In short, we are called to metanoia, we are called to change our minds, we are called to turn around...and if we do, lo and behold, we come face

to face with this strange Jesus who was standing right in front of us all the time, just waiting to lead the way.

In a little while, we shall name out loud some of our many beloved saints who have gone before us.

Our saints today remind us that life is short, that but for the grace of God, death is permanent.

The beatitudes are not so much a challenge as an invitation to trust that despite the seeming craziness of a life lived actually following Jesus, that craziness is the only path to real life: period, end of sentence.

That real life is our story; the story of those who follow Christ, even though it is a story we often forget, and when we do, it is to our peril.

It's the story of where we must go if we wish to encounter God, this God who is found in the most unexpected of places.

As the former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowland Williams says:

"There is only one story, and it contains all others.

At the center of that story is the always displaced God; who addresses us from the edge of human affairs, who chooses the place of the excluded.

As followers of Christ we aren't called to reject or legitimize our culture.

Culture exists, and we are immersed in it.

However, our lives as Christians are determined by the question of who or what our culture is forgetting today, since it is there that we shall find God – waiting for us.

This is not about being a liberal or a conservative, it's about the truth revealed in Christ's gospel.

What we learn in the gospel is that the more socially acceptable a cause, the more likely that the crucified God has moved on; the more enshrined a practice or a trend, the more likely that God is elsewhere.

If we are to follow Jesus, and not merely admire him, then only one thing is needed: to develop, every day, the mind of the crucified." R. Williams, paraphrased.

At the end of that movie, George Clooney finds himself walking into farm country in Iowa, and as he climbs a small hill he watches the sun set over beautiful fields, a few cows are grazing nearby and the scene is utterly peaceful; until his car explodes and erupts in flames!

He runs toward the car, takes off his watch and throws it, along with his wallet, into the burning wreck, and walks away...leaving us to wonder, will he, will we, at long last choose another way to live?

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