

Summer in the Beatitudes: *An Appetite for God*

Matthew 5:6

July 13, 2008

GR FUMC

We are looking this summer at the Beatitudes, the Blessings, God's blessings as the gospel writer Matthew recorded them. The Irish have many blessings. You see them on greeting cards and needlepoint pillows and painted signs that hang above the door. Blessings for travelers and friends, for guests and cows, for the coming of dawn and the coming of dusk. Here's one you might hear sung in a pub:

**May you have many friends
And may they be as mature in taste and health and color
And sought after as the contents of this glass.**

**May you have warm words on a cold evening
A full moon on a dark night
And the road downhill all the way to your door.**

**May every hair on your head turn into a candle
To light your way to heaven,
And may God and his Holy Mother
Take the harm of the years away from you.**

**And may you have no frost on your spuds,
No worms on your cabbage.
May your goat give plenty of milk
And if you should buy a donkey
Please, God, she be pregnant!**

I am Scotch, not Irish. And I have been in a London pub, but never an Irish pub. So I can't testify to the truth of this story, but writer Megan McKenna says she's had this blessing sung to her after a few pints, and I'm inclined to believe her.

A blessing, McKenna says, is many things: "a prayer, a cry of joy, an acknowledgment of innate goodness and well-being, an affirmation that draws us into a charmed and intimate circle of people, the telling of a truth that honors our deepest realities." Above all, a blessing is "a description of reality present *and* of reality to be fervently expected" (McKenna, 10-11).

Blessings stand in two different time frames: they speak of now and future, here and hereafter, already and not yet. In the same way blessings are both passive and active: they speak of what is to be given and what is to be achieved; the recipient of a blessing is simply that, a receiver. But there's also the implication that something is to be done with the gift that one has received, that the grace is meant to be passed

on, that what we become by virtue of God's favor is even more important than what we are now.

We are used to hearing the Beatitudes expressed passively:

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

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

According to Elias Chacour, however, in the original Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, the word "blessing" was *ashray* and *ashray* does not have a passive quality to it at all. "Instead, it means 'to set yourself on the right way for the right goal; to turn around, repent; to become righteous.'

What does a persecuted Palestinian or an exiled Zimbabwean or a tortured political prisoner hear when we say, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,' or 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'? I think they would rightly reject those verses as no more than platitudes, meant to appease, but not to inspire change. I think they would conclude that neither we nor the God of these sayings could possibly understand their situation.

But Chacour says that when he reads Jesus' words as they were spoken in Aramaic, they go something like this: 'Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for you shall be satisfied. Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you peacemakers, for you shall be called children of God.' 'Get your hands dirty to build a human society for human beings; otherwise, others will torture and murder the poor, the voiceless, and the powerless.

This style of Christianity is not passive but active; it goes beyond despairing of evil to producing a living, energetic counter-response to it.

This morning's beatitude, in particular, acknowledges that things are not as they should be. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who yearn for things to be made right. Blessed are those who have worked up an appetite for God, who long for God's reign, because the world as it is is not as God intended. This is a blessing for those who look around them and see anything *but* God's rule.

For the last week our church has been "home" to 13 people (X families, X adults and X children). As part of our participation in the Interfaith Hospitality Network we provide meals, shelter, showers and (most importantly) support and companionship four/three times a year to families in our community who have no place else to stay. (Sometimes there are as many as XX.) Those 13 are a tiny fraction of the approximately 25,000 homeless people in our state who have some

type of temporary housing. A much larger number, more than 40,000 homeless people are not part of any shelter system. On any one night around our country, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million people are homeless, and over the course of one year, 3 million people will have been homeless.

And that's just one sign that things are not as they should be. Violence, illness, the destruction of the natural world. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to rage against what was never meant to be. As Henri Nouwen wrote:

Mourn, my people, mourn. Let your pain rise up in your heart and burst forth in you with sobs and cries. Mourn for the silence that exists between you and your spouse. Mourn for the way you were robbed of your innocence. Mourn for the absence of a soft embrace, an intimate friendship, a life-giving sexuality. Mourn for the abuse of your body, your mind, your heart. Mourn for the bitterness of your children, the indifference of your friends, your colleagues' hardness of heart. Mourn for those whose hunger for love brought them AIDS, whose desire for freedom brought them to refugee camps, whose hunger for justice brought them to prisons. Cry for the millions who die from lack of food, lack of care, lack of love.... Don't think of this as normal, something to be taken for granted, something to accept.... Think of it as the dark force of Evil that has penetrated every human heart, every family, every community, every nation, and keeps you imprisoned. Cry for freedom, for salvation, for redemption. Cry loudly and deeply, and trust that your tears will make your eyes see that the Kingdom is close at hand, yes, at your fingertips!

(New Oxford Review, June 1992, quoted in McKenna, 88)

It is not the purpose of religion to ignore the pain of the world. God does not give us the gift of faith and faithful community in order that we might pretend that everything is fine. We are asked to put on Christ, not rose-colored glasses. Religion is not meant to insulate us from the world's pain, in fact just the opposite -- to bring us closer to it. To make us able to feel the world's suffering without being crushed by its power. Faith makes it possible to live in the knowledge that things are not right, because faith gives us a vision of what can be, what should be, what will be.

Some of you are aware that in the coming week, the city of Grand Rapids will be hosting the quadrennial meeting of the North Central Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church. In other words, this is a gathering that happens every four years, involving representatives from the 12 United Methodist Conferences that make up the nine northern midwest states reaching from Ohio to the Dakotas. Their primary purpose is to elect and appoint bishops to the conferences within the jurisdiction. This year it's Grand Rapids' turn to host the meeting, and our church has the honor of hosting the episcopal consecration at the end of the week. On these steps this Saturday morning a new bishop will receive a blessing, a commission and the laying on of hands as he or she is charged to lead the people of the church in service to Christ.

I've been a little preoccupied lately with the preparation of some of the details of that worship service. As part of my responsibilities, I met the dancers who will be participating in the service as they rehearsed their piece in the sanctuary this past Wednesday morning. They are a special needs dance troupe. I had never seen a special needs dance troupe, I didn't know what to expect, and (I'll admit it) I was a little concerned that they might not "fit in" with the pomp and circumstance of an episcopal consecration service.

The group was made up of seven girls, their teacher and a couple of mothers. One girl was in a wheelchair and the others walked slowly, with differing limps and hesitations. Not all of them could stand with straight backs, but all of them wore pink ballet slippers and enormous smiles. I fell in love instantly.

"Would you like to see our dance?" they asked. Of course I would. I sat down next to the mothers. The music began and seven crooked bodies, seven signs that the world is not what it should be, were transformed into the most graceful, no, most grace-filled, dancers I have ever seen.

I am a big dance fan. I am the mother of college dance major and a long-time tap dancer. I have attended performances by the Bolshoi, the American Ballet Theatre and the San Francisco Ballet. Once upon a time I had season's tickets to the New York City Ballet. Nothing I have ever seen on a dance stage could rival the remarkable joy and beauty of these dancers. Their arms arched overhead, their legs lifted in time; they were slow but utterly confident of what they were doing. The wheelchair was transformed from a mechanical device into a dancer itself as it wheeled around in circles, carrying other dancers and partnering with its operator. Helping each other up the steps was simply part of the choreography.

By the end of the dance tears were streaming down my cheeks. I heard the two mothers sniffing as well and we laughed with each other. "Is this the first time you've seen this dance?" I asked. "Oh no," they answered, "We've seen it thousands of times. It always makes us cry!"

"Special needs" indeed. These girls know in their very bones, literally, that things in life are not always as they should be. They know intimately and constantly that the human condition is far from perfect. But through the work of their less-than-perfect bodies, they not only celebrated, they shared with me the grace of God who is the source of all that is good and right and perfect. Their bodies were not changed, but I was changed; I had seen a vision of God's kingdom, a few moments of perfection, a foretaste of heaven.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that "A blessing demands to be passed on – it communicates itself to other people. To be blessed is to be oneself a blessing." These dancers knew they were blessed, so they became a blessing to me and will be a blessing to hundreds this Saturday. [Bonhoeffer quoted in McKenna,

Hungering for God is the beginning of faith. Thirsting for righteousness starts you on the path to God's kingdom.

Come to me, says Christ all you who are hungry, and I will be your bread. Having tasted that bread, can we do anything else but share it with others? Come to me, all you with parched throats and dry lives, and I will be your living water. With such refreshment, what else can we do but offer a cup to the thirsty world?

Come to me, all you whose bodies are broken, whose dreams are damaged, whose spirits are wounded, and I will be your healing balm. We are far from perfect, but we are the ones called by Christ to feed his sheep.

Come to me, all who live in darkness, and I will be your light.

Yes, the Holy Spirit kindles within us a light. No matter how pale it seems, it awakens in our souls the desire for God. And that simple desire for God is already prayer. Praying does not remove us from the world's preoccupations. On the contrary, nothing is more responsible than praying: the more we live a very simple, very humble prayer, the more we are brought to love and to express that by our lives.

(Brother Roger of Taizé)

References

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