

A RETREAT ON THE BEATITUDES IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
To the voice of my supplications!
If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you.
(Psalm 130:1-4)

From the Spiritual Exercises

I will conclude with a colloquy, extolling the mercy of God, our Lord, pouring out my thoughts to Him, and giving thanks to Him that up to this very moment He has granted me life. (Sp. Ex. #61)

Grace to be prayed for: A rootedness in the Father, out of which flows a love, lived as a companion of the Son, and manifested in a service inspired by the Spirit.

This exercise asks to us to examine thoroughly the ways we have been actively or passively involved in, or have contributed to,

the destructiveness of sin, so that we can be liberated into love. Ignatius asks us now to pray for “a growing and intense sorrow and tears for my sins” (#55:2). The thrust of this exercise is to break down the defenses of the ego so that it becomes aware of its limitations and defects in contrast to the goodness, mercy, wisdom, and life-giving creativity and generosity of God. We realize here that we are not God; we are not the centre and the meaning of the universe. God, the centre and meaning, cares for our true selves, and sustains, maintains, and cherishes them. This exercise focuses on the mercy of God as realized by our new and growing understanding of our sinful nature. It aims at developing from our side the relationship with God that we have neglected or displaced.

People falling in love usually share their deepest and darkest secrets with the other, almost to test if the beloved could bear to love them in their darkness. In this exercise, we are encouraged to share those secrets: not to debase ourselves but to confirm to ourselves that we are loved to the core of our being, and that we can be held even as we admit those moments when we were unloving, unlovable, and unloved.

To do this we will spend some time with the Beatitudes of Matthew’s gospel, since praying with them opens the prisons that

prevent our hearts from contacting the intimate love God has for each of us.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says,

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.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10)

We journey towards God in our daily lives. God also journeys in us to the depths of our being, where we are open and intimate with that compassionate mercy. As the lover and the beloved come close to each other, both are changed. We become more human, and we discover God as if for the first time. The journey through the Beatitudes is a journey into spiritual intimacy, into becoming more and more alive, and into discovering the power of God who desires to let us see and know and love ourselves the way the Trinity sees and knows and loves us all.

In this journey, we are liberated from whatever traps us in false self-images, in destructive relationships, or in stories that distort the truth of our lives. As we walk that pilgrimage, we discover the real cost to ourselves of the malign power in sin and evil. We also become aware of that constant, involved, and creative mercy of God incessantly labouring for us, and for all of creation, to return to intimacy and right relationship with Him. God does not wait for us to return to Him because we have lost the way. God comes seeking us in ways that give us our freedom and reconstruct our integrity.

This intimacy breaks down the false defenses of the ego so that it becomes aware of its limitations and defects in contrast to the goodness, the mercy, the wisdom, and the life-giving creativity and generosity of God. The path of the Beatitudes reveals the mercy of God in our lives and invites us to share that mercy with whomever we meet.

Because this exercise is difficult, breaking it up into separate parts is helpful. We will use the path through the Beatitudes in Matthew's gospel to discover our poverty of spirit and God's overwhelming love for us in this state. We will look at the ways we destructively compensate for that poverty of spirit. To experience God's love, we are called to enter into those tragic dimensions of our lives. When we do this prayerfully and patiently, we discover the

transforming power of God's love. The Beatitudes, which embody the Christian vision, are a powerful way of opening ourselves to conversion. Most of us live out of our hurts. Praying the Beatitudes transforms those hurts into encounters with God's compassionate mercy. This journey will carry us to experience passionately a love that embraces us into the fullness of life. It is the essence of the First Week of the Exercises. The personal dimensions we encounter here embody the very brokenness of our lives and God's invitation to hold them up to the power of resurrection.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus Christ is presented as the new Moses leading his people out of slavery through the desert into the promised land. Praying the Beatitudes carries us from the bondage of whatever stops us from being free, with its illusions about freedom, to a life that rejoices in a personal intimacy with God.

To enter the Beatitudes and be carried by them, we must spend time with the first one. This allows us to experience both the degree to which our lives are beyond our control as well as how much we are held and cherished by God. The unfinished business that arises in our prayer from each beatitude carries us in an intensely personal way to the next one. This path leads to an ever-deeper awareness of the presence of God in our lives. Allow enough time to enter into the dynamics of each beatitude. Each is a blessing

that reveals its depths only in patience and prayerful reflection. The love that surrounds us will reveal what we need to know and do. This first beatitude describes the human condition and God's gift to us as we truly are.

[1] Blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of God

Followers of Jesus follow the path of Christ. We realize that our lives are handed over to the mystery we call God, not in some abstract way, but here and now, concretely: not only with who we are, but who we are with, and in the situations within ourselves, within our immediate communities, our families and friends, and within the manifestations of the Church today. To realize this is to realize our poverty.

We have little control over these areas of our lives. Often we prefer to hide from this poverty and from the fact that we are truly broken people. We are broken intellectually, physically, emotionally, spiritually, communally. Today we are asked to take time to acknowledge the brokenness in our lives – the brokenness that is our life. We put aside, gently but firmly, the illusions we have of being whole, and stop pretending that we are God. Truly we are the emptiness that only God can fill.

Before we can be filled, we must admit our poverty. When we do this, we open ourselves to the path that leads to the kingdom of God. Instead of viewing our poverty as a horror and a burden, we may see it as a door that we need to walk through. We need to be led and carried by our poverty to the wounded places where we are raw, vulnerable, naked. There we contact our own poverty, other people's poverty, and the poverty of the world. Poverty allows us to discover community, which is the kingdom of God in our midst.

Poverty of spirit is the radical awareness of our nothingness and of our dependence on Divine Providence for health, approval, image, identity, friendship, even life itself. To enter into poverty of spirit is to enter the realm where we are stripped of illusions – even the illusions of our illusions. Poverty of spirit sentences us to death, beyond the awareness of our mortality. When we live out of that poverty, the unexpected happens. We see every moment as a gift, a luxury. Every moment is one of pure wonder. Such poverty cuts a lot of nonsense out of our lives. Because we cannot compromise that poverty, we do not need to defend ourselves, or sacrifice ourselves to maintain false images. We can be simple and tolerant in our suffering and the suffering of others.

The discipline of poverty is to remain empty. In that emptiness comes the presence of God as God in the surprising forms of Divine

Providence. There the scandal of the cross is transformed into the awe of the resurrection. To live in that emptiness is to change our self-image and our expectations of others. It changes the way we imagine the world. We become so open that the energies of God can flow through us into the world.

Poverty of spirit is liberation from illusion; it is the ground of detachment. Here we can simply and shamelessly be passionate with God, and God is simply and shamelessly passionate with us, even in our bodies. Right here and right now.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. What are your gifts? How do you use them? How are you trapped by them?
2. What are your poverties? How do you hide from them? What happens to you when you enter into those areas?
3. What are the areas in which you do not believe in yourself? What are the areas in which you do not believe in others, or in God?
4. Where do you feel threatened? Where does your body tell you that you are threatened?
5. How are you threatened by God? by your family and friends? by your community? by yourself? by your prayer? How do you

experience that threat in your body? [that feeling is the first embrace of God – the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom]

6. What are the areas of vulnerability in your life?

7. What are the areas that can humiliate you?

8. What are the areas in which you are humbled?

9. Poverty takes only what is needed from this world, nothing more.

Can you distinguish between what you want and what you need? To know what that is requires discipline, spirit, wisdom. Can you pray for that grace – generally, and in specific instances?

10. What aspects of your own poverty of spirit do you feel called to spend some more time with? How will you do that? Can you sit in the presence of God and allow God to encounter your own poverty of spirit? What happens when you do that?

11. Our poverty of spirit never goes away. As the Buddha's First Noble Truth has it, everyone suffers. How can we suffer and yet be in the kingdom of God? Simone Weil says that when we follow false gods suffering is transformed into violence; a true God transforms suffering into pain. Where does your violence come from? Where does the violence inflicted upon you come from? How has that suffering been transformed into pain? How is your suffering to be transformed into pain?

Scripture suggestions for prayer

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3)

Psalms 136:34

Isaiah 41:17-20; 55:1-56:9

Luke 1:5-38

Phillipians 2:1-11

Revelation 3:14-22

When we enter our poverty of spirit, we discover that there are aspects of our lives that trap us and stop us from living joyfully, simply, and compassionately. We need to be liberated from these. The second beatitude offers us the next step in that liberation.

[2] Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

To mourn is to acknowledge death and the call to a life beyond death. Mourning is the movement to resurrection, where we are saved, not by anything we have done or can do – not even by our hope – but by the generosity of God. In mourning, we let go of our dead into the shaping spirit of the One who forms us all. Mourning is our responsibility to the dead. In mourning them, we are present to them and allow God to reach through us to touch them. Mourning reminds us that we, living and dead, are still being created. That process of creation is a constant transformation. When we hold onto the dead, or allow the dead to hold onto us, we stop that work of

transformation and creation. We reject God's gift of creativity in our lives and in our world.

To mourn, then, we must first acknowledge the presence and effect of the dead in our lives. To only remember the dead as they were is to create a tomb; it equates this life with all that they are. But that is not all they are. They are now embraced by a love that transforms them as they accept it. If we fail to believe this, and so often we do, then we fear to mourn, and we hold on to a rotting corpse. We seek ways to pretend that what is dead is alive. The only way this is possible is to become dead ourselves. We become trapped by a past that gives no life. So imprisoned, we deny life to ourselves and to those around us. By pretending that the dead are alive, we repress death and enter into a false freedom where the dead possess us unconsciously because we have not released them into the power of resurrection. Then they shape the path we walk. Our fear of abandonment, our desire for the security we once knew, is a form of despair that, in reality, death is the end. We can be so blinded that we cannot see the corruption and the stink we carry. Yet it manifests itself in our cynicism, our despair, our rigidity, our self-righteousness. Then we do not bring life to others, but rather take it away. The basis of this is fear. Such a fear denies that God is

stronger than death and more compassionate and life-giving than we are.

We must first look at the ways we are trapped by fear. This can only be done in the context of a love that holds us securely. Our prayer at this time offers us that love. Then, we can become conscious of the ways the dead influence our perceptions, our ways of thinking and acting. We can fight against this awareness or we can welcome it. In so doing, we begin to realize how our traditions – personal, family, cultural, religious – affect us. Tradition is the handing on of life and of spirit. Some aspects of our tradition free us; other aspects do not. We are asked always to choose life and to hand on life. We are asked to hand over to resurrection what traps us in death. Then we will see death as part of life, rather than living life as part of death. When we acknowledge the presence of the dead and their effect on our lives, we become aware of the work we must do in our desire for liberation. We note that we ourselves cannot transform death into life. Resurrection is always a gift from God. But we can dispose ourselves for resurrection by accepting the love that raised Christ from the dead. That love did not resuscitate the dead Christ, but transformed the dead Christ into a new creation. This same love does not bring our dead back to life, but

transforms our dead into a new life. Our work is to bring the dead to that transforming love.

We offer the dead our mutual path to the resurrection, where the fullness of life is possible only when all of creation comes together as one in joy and in the shared gratitude of being redeemed into a common life. For to mourn is to enter into community; the comfort offered to those who mourn is the growing realization that the very act of mourning is also the act in which resurrection happens. Mourning creates joy. Mourning transforms grief into hope. In grieving we become aware of loss and of the fragility of the “world” in which we live and find our meaning. We admit our inability to maintain that world. And in grieving, we live with the fragments of that world and with the empty spaces between those fragments that nothing can fill. Grief kills. Mourning brings life. When we mourn we bring all our grief to God. There we abide in the lived consolation of being companions together in this dreadful adventure, and wait in prayer for the tombs to open and the new life we call resurrection to occur.

Questions for prayer:

1. What are the dead of your life? What are the things you despair over, believe are unchangeable, in your life, in the life of families, in

the larger communities? How do these things relate to your poverty of spirit?

2. What are the dangers you encounter in your mourning? For example, how do you distinguish between mourning and being critical? Can you distinguish between “coming back from the dead” and “resurrection”?

3. How does your grieving alienate you from others? What happens when your identity becomes fixated in grief or nostalgia?

4. Who, or what, have you found personally helpful in your process of mourning?

5. Do you have any instances of resurrection in your life? How were you surprised? How have you shared the resurrection you have received?

6. What things, places, works, and/or people, in your life would you like to experience resurrection? What ways have you tried, or do you try, to promote resurrection to these? Another way of asking that question is, How do you comfort others?

7. What is the difference between solitude and loneliness?

8. Can you experience solitude without being lonely? How is this possible?

9. What illusions has your personal encounter with death removed from your life? What illusions has that encounter provoked?

10. Heidegger says we are beings thrown towards death. How do you live in this radical contingency that questions every aspect of your life?

11. Our relationship with Christ does not allow us to evade death. We must all die. How do you experience that relationship with Christ in the face of death? How do you experience your relationship with the Father in the face of death?

Scripture Passages for Prayer

John 11:1-45

Luke 7:11-17

Matthew 9:1-7

Matthew 17:1-13

Luke 4:14-30

Luke 23:50-24:11

John 20:11-18

When we mourn, we discover a certain liberation. This manifests itself in a loss of fear, a certain flexibility in our attitudes, the ability to delight in what is given as gift without clinging to it. But we also discover those elements in our lives that refuse to let us be free. They do violence to us, and we are tempted to do violence back to them in our struggle to be free. Because we are not always conscious of them, they also incite us to be violent in our relationships with other people. The third beatitude addresses this

issue of violence, because, as Christ has pointed out, "The kingdom of heaven is overtaken by violence; the violent bear it away" (Matthew 11:12). Violence destroys the community love seeks to create.

[3] Blessed are the gentle; they shall inherit the earth

We are all vulnerable. If we were to meditate on our vulnerability, we would discover in ourselves opposing tensions in our living out of our vulnerability. Such vulnerability can breed fear when we internalize the forces that threaten us. The fear creates alienation when we understand the "other" to be inimical to our well-being, and the alienation manifests itself in violence as we try to defend that space in which we find our identity. Then "the kingdom of heaven is taken by violence and the violent destroy it" (Matthew 11:12).

But there is another approach to being vulnerable. Vulnerability opens us to the dimensions of Divine Providence in our lives when we realize, in examining our very histories, that we are not destroyed, but instead are saved in spite of ourselves. The awareness of our lives being held in God's care moves us to gratitude, especially when grasp how easily we can be destroyed. This spirit of gratitude manifests itself in the gentleness with which

we deal with ourselves, others, and the world. We do not have to be violent to maintain ourselves. God's power comes "to save all the meek of the earth" (Psalm 76:10).

To be gentle is, first of all, to face not only our vulnerability, but also the horror, the abject nakedness, and the blind misery that masquerade as the powers of this world, without becoming paralyzed or trapped by fear – our own or others'. To be gentle calls us to be attentive (as opposed to blind) to the forces that comprise our world; to be discerning, insightful, political and flexible in dealing with these forces; and to be responsible – rather than reactive – for the transformation of the oppressor and the oppressed. To be gentle calls us to dance in the flames, and in the ashes, and in the hard places of this life. The witness of this gentleness lies neither in our devotion to an ideology of social justice nor in withdrawal from the arenas of social effect. It lies in the manifest joy of knowing with our own body the presence of the powers of good that are holding, protecting, affirming, and guiding us along the path that is salvation.

This joy allows us to see, in the cracks and the terrors of this world, the promise of paradise. It invites us to co-operate with the powers of good by being present, humbly and gratefully, at precisely those places, so that through our simple presence, the mystery we call God can enter the world.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. What are the areas of violence in your life [individually, communally]?
2. In what ways does your lifestyle create violence to your integrity, to your family, to the larger community?
3. How do you feed your violence, communicate your violence – in your silence, apathy, speech, narcissism, and in the practice of your daily life?
4. What difficulties do you have in reconciling your notions of gentleness with your idea of what it means to inherit the earth?
5. What possibilities of transformation open up when you do not assert your self-righteousness?
6. What comes to you when you pray for the grace to be gentle?
7. How can you affirm others in being a person for/with others in the context of your limited resources?
8. Moses was called “the meekest of men” (Numbers 12:3). How does this give you some indication of what meekness is? Can meekness then be seen as a disposability to the will of God, as opposed to pride, which makes you the centre of meaning and creation?

9. How is gentleness different from apathy, conformity, weakness, powerlessness, cowardice, passivity, victimhood?

10. How do the meek attract the heart and open it? What in you cries out to be opened now?

Scripture Passages for Prayer:

Matthew 27:15-23

Matthew 11:25-30

Matthew 7:7-12

Isaiah 29:13-21

Isaiah 61:1-4

Psalms 37; 75; 131; 138

It is always shocking to discover the violence that is in us, and the violence that is around us. In fact, we have become so accustomed to violence that we might consider it a normal part of living, and characteristic of being human. But when we discover how much of our lives are caught up in violence, from which there seems to be no escape, we feel helpless and overwhelmed. We cry out for a different reality. We cry out for conversion. Those who hunger and thirst for such a transformed world, and who place themselves on the path to such a life, enter into the work of the fourth beatitude.

[4] Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice; they shall be satisfied

The practice of freedom lies in the midst of evil, not beyond it. If our choices enslave anyone, we are not free. The freedom that liberates is generated through God's saving activity and our abiding intimacy in that relationship, which God's constant creativity establishes and maintains here and now, even in the midst of suffering caused by the aggressions of narcissism. God's love for us sets us free. When we are rooted in that love, we may strive for the justice that liberates all. True justice comes only from justification. As we accept that everyone is loved – even when we sin – we approach what it means to be justified. Otherwise, our understanding of justice remains fallen, defined in terms of recompense, and of contract and social norms. Then our commitment to justice, on whatever level – personal, communal, social, or cultural – is maintained within the boundaries of self-knowledge and self-interest. This is the position of the Pharisees and the Zealots. It is the position of those who destroy others, and even themselves, to maintain what they think is right.

Such a position denies the depths of what it means to be human. First, it denies the pervasiveness of sin in our lives, so that we are blind to our blindness. Second, below the manifestations of that sin, it denies the constant hunger we are for God. Moreover, it manipulates people's hunger for God into accepting cult and ritual

through guilt and repression. But we are not saved by the word of the law, whether religious or secular. We are saved only by the Giver of the spirit that finds some inadequate expression in the law. Our hunger is not satisfied by the law, but in a relationship with the living Word under whose Cross we find our life. To hunger and thirst for salvation is to commit to that life, not only for ourselves, but for all. It is to experience the agony of the passion as we struggle with all of our energies so that the fullness of life may be tangibly present to all in the sacrament of daily life.

On the Cross, Christ is at his most creative. In this act, he overcomes those powers that, in their blindness, self-service, and malice, attempt to prevent life from being given to all who desire it. When we hunger and thirst for God, we hunger and thirst for a set of relationships for everyone in which the only criterion is mutual love. In John, Jesus prays to the Father for his companions, “that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one” (17:22-23).

The justice we embody is the witness of the justification we experience. How we treat ourselves and others manifests not only what we love, but how we love. That love is where we put our lives. Ignatius says that “love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words”; he continues “the lover gives and shares with the beloved

what he possesses” (Sp. Ex. #230:1, 231:2). When we hunger and thirst for justice we live our poverty in a way that allows the mercy of God to be manifest through us. We experience that desire even in our bodies, for our bodies are how we are in this world. We incarnate our desire with our bodies. Our desire is for the community of love that includes all without exception. That desire is met and embraced by God’s desire to create that community of love. That passion the Father has for the world makes us also his living words in the circumstances in which we find (and lose) ourselves.

We desire to be saved because we cannot save ourselves. When we follow the path of that desire, we allow God to come to us, and through us, into the world. The joy and gratitude we experience when that happens embolden us to continue God’s mission in the world, because we discover we are all one.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. Can you accept that you are loved? What stops us from accepting this?
2. What areas in your life are silenced, not believed, oppressed, marginalized, colonized? How are they to be loved into life?
3. What are you passionate about?

4. What is the connection between the way you see social justice and the way you experience God?
5. How do you inflict alienation on others? Do others experience you as an open door to the mystery we call God?
6. In what ways do you need to be more joyful?
7. What subverts your creativity into anger, or apathy?
8. What excites your creativity? What affirms your creativity in the present situation? In what ways can you commit ourselves to your creativity?
9. What happens when you allow ourselves to be passionate for God, and allow God to be passionate with you?
10. What happens when you ask for this in prayer?

Scripture Passages for Prayer

Psalm 130

Matthew 5:20-28

Luke 18:1-14

Romans 8:1-39

Romans 12:9-21

Exodus 3:1-18

When we experience the gift of being loved, we start to see how destructive violence is. We realize how that love loved us even when we were unloving, even when we were violent in our inability to

love. This is the experience of mercy. It renders us merciful to those we encounter who have not yet experienced this gift. We give what we have received. In that giving, we enter deeper into the kingdom by making it more available to all.

[5] Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy

Mercy is absurd. It is neither prudent nor politic. It has no aims, expects no rewards and is not self-congratulatory. It strives to love its enemies, expecting nothing in return. In this it imitates God, who is “kind to the ungrateful and the selfish” (Luke 6:36). The merciful are always aware that God is good to us even as we sin, and so come to realize that God’s justice is his mercy, his constancy of help, and his patience, which manifests itself in the gift of time. That mercy is not pity, which sees the suffering of the other and is only interiorly moved by it. Human mercy, like divine mercy, goes out of itself to transform the suffering of the sinner. Human mercy flows as an act of gratitude at having experienced divine mercy. That gratitude covenants God and man. That spirit of gratitude does not abet sin, but strives to bring those trapped in sin to the truth of their lives – the acceptance of the fact that they are loved, and that, in the circumstances of their lives, they can be loving.

The merciful are not judgmental. They know what it is to be trapped and what it is to be freed from those traps, and how easily, but for the constant support of God, they may be trapped again. Their personal history makes them attentive to the broken of the world, whether rich or poor, powerful or weak, shamed or shameless. It gives them the lived experience from which they can distinguish between “want” and “need,” and allows them to respond to the need in people’s lives. They realize the interconnectedness of all life, and the desire of all to be rooted in that interconnectedness. It is to realize everything concerns us and evokes our compassion.

Yet we cannot do everything; the attempt to do everything denies us mercy. We can do only what we have been gifted to do. Our gifts are at the service of those we meet on our daily path. We are to be as open doors through which the world’s needs meet God. In every encounter that need is manifest because no one is fully saved until all are fully saved. The preferential option for the poor recognizes the poverty in everyone and addresses it as Jesus did in his gospel life, scandalizing the self-righteous, who were blind to their own needs and thus blind to the needs of others (Matthew 25:34-40).

We can never be as merciful as we would wish, but we can be merciful as we are, with the little we have. In sharing that poverty,

we discover what it means to be human. For the hard heart which cannot be hurt cannot love, either. To be merciful is to take the risk that one will be taken advantage of, be made a fool of. Indeed, this is often the case if we are concerned with self. But if we give what we have been given, this is never the case. It is easy to abuse God's gifts. Human history is the history of such abuse. Yet God does not stop giving; our history is also one of salvation. Mercy is rooted in the absurdity of love – of being loved and of being offered the opportunity to love. It is expressed as gratitude for that felt knowledge.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. Have you ever received mercy? Have you ever offered mercy? What was the experience like – then, and now as you reflect on it?
2. What are you truly grateful for? What do you accept as your right? What is the difference? What do you reject out of that sense of your rights?
3. What gifts can you offer others now?
4. What gifts can you offer your community? What do you do if your gifts are not accepted by the community?
5. How do you deal with rejection?

6. What can you risk to create community? What do you risk to create community?
7. Have you ever been trapped? How did you become free of that trap?
8. How do you direct your energies towards the life given you, rather than in building your defenses against that inevitable last breath?
9. What are the things that stop you from being merciful? Is it the fear of being used, of seeming weak; is it simple blindness; is it your preoccupation with your own needs?
10. How does your understanding of righteousness in your daily life stop you from being merciful?
11. How do we distinguish between mercy and pity? Why is mercy the expression of our common, naked vulnerability?
12. At this moment, where do you need mercy? Can you ask for it? At this moment, where can you show mercy? Can you give it? Is it to yourself?
13. What moves you as you stay with this prayer?

Scripture Passages for Prayer

Psalms 22 and 23; 86; 88 and 118
Luke 6:27-38

Luke 18:9-14
John 8:2-11
Luke 23:32-46

We are never fully converted, and will never be until every aspect of creation is fully united to God, because every aspect of creation, including ourselves, is interconnected. But we are on our way, and along our way, through our acts of mercy, we offer to all the gift of living in God. When we live this way we are turned towards God. Then we desire God and we desire to find God in all things and all persons, and in all the circumstances of our lives. To live this way is to be pure of heart. Jesus, in the sixth beatitude, assures us that as we live our lives this way, as we walk this path, we shall embrace God, our beloved.

[6] Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God

Our deepest desire is from God. Our deepest desire seeks God in all things. That desire directs our spiritual path. In the course of living our lives, we discover that we are shaped by many desires, and we seek discernment: which desires lead to the building up of the kingdom of God and which do not. The manifestations of our deepest desire move us to be companions of Christ. Those other desires are energies, or patterns of energy, that have somehow

become detached from our deepest desire and lead a separate existence. They can be identified by that separation. Consolation occurs when our desires harmonize with the energies of the Spirit; joy occurs when our energies harmonize with those of those around us; happiness occurs when those energies surrounding us harmonize with ours; pleasure occurs when those energies submit to us. The range between consolation to desolation is from community to narcissism.

To be pure in heart is to be on the path to integration where all the energies of our life – spiritual, social, communal, personal, emotional, intellectual, sexual – are woven together by our deepest desire. That deepest desire carries us beyond our present sense of self into truer and more intimate modes of being with others. The focus of that path is on relationship rather than ritual, on prophesy rather than professionalism. The integrity of the weave of those energies makes no distinction between private and public, between self and other. To be pure in heart is to realize the unity of all that exists and to value all that exists. This unity includes the energies that comprise the self, and this unity manifests singleness of purpose. As we move on the path of purity of heart, we discover a singleness of purpose that makes us flexible to the Spirit. That union of spirit – the passion for community – carries us to those places

where displaced and separated energies come to light. Then we endure the exorcisms of encountering a love that reweaves those straying energies into a simpler and more integrated life

The trials of living this way embody the struggle between narcissism and community. As we walk the path and struggle for that more total integration we discover that nothing human is foreign to us. Such self-awareness makes us humble; in that humility, we become more and more disposed to the dance of the energies, more open to the darkness in which God dwells, where we see first not with the eyes, but with the heart.

What the heart sees is that everything that exists is holy. To be pure in heart is to enter into the struggle of creation, in which everything is involved. It is to realize that call to holiness in all the circumstances of life. Evil is fragmented holiness; the task of the pure in heart is the careful gathering up of those fragments into unity – the unknotting of the tangled energies that hold us in the bondage of compulsion and oppression. The pure of heart, by the simple act of being present, heal the afflicted, bind up the brokenhearted, give sight to the blind, set free the enslaved, and announce to the world the presence of God among us, so that they can freely enter into the play and the delight of the life where God dwells.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. What are the current divisions in your personal life? in the life of your community?
2. How do those divisions affect you? What are you concretely doing about them?
3. What are the difficulties you encounter as you strive to witness to the integrity of God?
4. Can you discern between passion and compulsion? Between indifference and apathy? Between pilgrimage and forced marches?
5. Where are the freedoms in your life? How do those freedoms come together? What aspects of your life are in pilgrimage (as opposed to bondage and its forced marches)? Where do you celebrate? How? With whom?
6. What is the witness of our life? Who witnesses God to us?
7. Purity of heart just opens the doors of perception. Purity of heart does not create what is perceived. What is given to the pure of heart is a gift. It sees what has always been there waiting to be celebrated. What has been given to us in our own vision quest?
8. Have you ever had an experience that you considered a personal revelation? How has it shaped your life?

9. Can you talk about the stages of your spiritual journey that led to an encounter with the divine?

10. Can you talk about the stages of your spiritual journey after that encounter with the divine?

Scripture Passages for Prayer

Genesis 22:1-19

Psalm 116

Romans 8:1-39

Matthew 4:1-11

Mark 5:1-20

Revelation 19:9-11

As the pure of heart walk towards God, they gather up the broken, the disaffected, the alienated, and the fearful, along with the rich, the powerful, the gifted, the lucky, in an open community of common affection, mutual sharing, and respect. It is the work of the peacemaker to help create and maintain such communities. They are the kingdom of God on earth.

[7] Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called the children of God

Hatred destroys not only the other but also us. In maintaining hate we sacrifice ourselves to the lie that the enemy deserves to

die. This war, breeding more war, “is only a cowardly escape from the problems of peace” (Thomas Mann). The only way to overcome an enemy is to make the enemy a friend. The problem of peace is how to make an enemy a friend. To make peace is to move beyond apathy or tolerance. To make peace is to create community.

Community is created when we live in such a way that the energies of all are allowed positive expression. It is a question of imagination. Because we live in imagined worlds, what we imagine as real defines how we relate with others. When we indulge ourselves to imagine the world, instead of allowing ourselves to live as God imagines us, we follow the path of fantasy. And, as Yeats, in his poem “The Stare’s Nest by My Window,” observed of those fighting against each other in the civil war in Ireland,

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart’s grown brutal from the fare

Before we can create community, we need to ask what fantasies shape our lives and, further, what forces in our lives maintain those fantasies. If we see only through the filter of our hurts – rather than the call to creativity that gives us our vision – we project onto those we hate what has hurt us and what we deny in our own lives. We know these exist because they trap us and we experience feelings of hate.

We become peacemakers only as we make peace with ourselves, only as we acknowledge the hurt in our life, through a healing of memories and sensibilities within the vision that gives our life meaning. That vision emerges when we accept that we are all held in the compassionate mercy of God, and that no one is outside of that mercy. This meaning becomes real in our lives. not in terms of satisfaction. but through the modes of consolation. In consolation we are redefined. not according to fantasy. but through an immediate openness to God. That state “without any previous cause” moves us beyond our boundaries to a new awareness of reality in which what we consider impossible is possible. In this openness, the enemy can become the friend. This openness does not manipulate the other into becoming a friend. The other is always free to choose. Even self-sacrificing love – radical openness – does not make the other free. But it is the most we can do. We can love our enemy without indulging our enemy’s destructiveness, and hope for the best. This is our calling as human beings. We love each other, or we die.

Christ, the peacemaker, comes to show us how to reconcile ourselves to God, to each other, to ourselves, and to all the forces of creation. Reconciling the estranged is Christ’s mission. He does it by showing that we all have a common source, the Father, and that

we are all one in that same Father. We, Christ's companions, inherit that same mission from God, according to today's beatitude. Community can be built only if persons share a common vision in which everyone maintains a common good. That common good is manifested differently according to different gifts, but underlying these differences is the same spirit and a common vocation. The dynamics of integration required to be a person of peace are also necessary to be a community. Prayer, dialogue, openness, intimacy, and celebration, create life. The path of the peacemaker leads to the broken and hard places of our own life, community, and world. It takes up the Standard and Cross of Christ, our brother. We stand in those places, simply and humbly, as open doors, in our poverty of spirit. As open doors, we allow the mercy of God to enter the world, and allow the pain of the world to pass through us to be held by that transforming love of God.

Scripture Passages for Prayer

John 14:15-15:17

Gal. 5:13-6: 2

Eph. 2:8-22, 4:1-16

Rom. 5:1-11

Dan. 10:15-19

Isaiah 11:1-11

Questions for Reflection

1. Who is your community – the ones you share your life with? Why do you think so? How did you come to those relationships?
2. How do you find your community? Does it support your integrity? Are you inspired by the community, the society, the culture you live in?
3. What ideals of community life do you hold that alienate you from the people you live with?
4. Do you know the estranged parts of your life? Do you know the integrated parts of your life? Do you live out of alienation or integration with yourself, with your community? How do you realize, individually and collectively, your call to be a peacemaker where you find yourself now?
5. Who is not your community? Why do you say that? How do you treat those others?
6. What boundaries do you impose upon the way you imagine yourself? Are those boundaries open or closed?
7. How do you experience yourselves, and others, as mystery? With whom are you intimate?

8. How are you intimate with yourself – in terms of self-awareness, self-knowledge, being comfortable with yourself, loving yourself into transcendence?
9. How are you intimate with others?
10. How are you intimate with God, so that God can be fully present, through you, in the world?
11. What difficulties do you have with intimacy? What stops you from trusting? What concrete elements stop you from risking – that movement beyond trust into the darkness? What forms of fear, of established positions, of power, of disillusionment possess you?
12. Where do you find life? Where do you give life? Where do you take life?
13. To whom, and with whom, and for whom, do you feel responsible even with your very life?
14. Can you distinguish between peace-lovers, peacekeepers, and peacemakers? Where do you find yourself as members of a common humanity? of a common culture? of a common church? as an individual?
15. What do you do to bring about the kingdom of God in your daily life?
16. How is this beatitude a manifestation of the gospel reality of the passion of Christ?

17. How does your prayer on this beatitude reveal to you your own divided heart, the ways in which you are invited to do good, and the ways in which you succumb to evil?

18. In your conversations with God at the end of your prayer, what manifested itself to you?

Scripture Passages for Prayer

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called
“children of God.”

John 17:6-26; 1 John 1:5-2:17

1 Corinthians 12:1-14

Genesis 22:1-14

Genesis 32:24-31

Song of Songs 3:1-5; 8:6-7

Revelation 21:1-8

John 14:15-15:17

Galatians 5:13-6:2

Ephesians 2:8-22, 4:1-16

Romans 5:1-11

Daniel 10:15-19

Isaiah 11:1-11

To be a peacemaker is to enter the dark and dangerous places of life where there is conflict, violence, separation, and distrust, and to allow ourselves to be an instrument of God’s mercy there. It is to be a prophet. The hope and life offered by peace run counter to the powers of evil that seek destruction and despair. They turn against

the peacemaker in violence. Because evil is not creative, the pattern of its destructiveness is the same throughout the ages. The lives of prophets witness their intimacy with a power greater than evil. They have found that intimacy by walking the path of the Beatitudes. They have found a love they offer to the world.

[H] Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake

When our hearts are filled with longing for the kingdom, that longing shapes everything we do. We hold values different from the world's, trust what the world neither sees nor believes in and, then, because we are judged as "other," we become the objects of derision, or fear, or hatred. A Hasidic tale tells of a house where there was a wedding festival. The musicians sat in a corner and played their instruments, the guests danced to the music and were merry, and the house was filled with joy. But a deaf man passed outside of the house; he looked in through the window and saw the people whirling about the room, leaping, and throwing about their arms. "See how they fling themselves about!" he cried. "It is a house filled with madmen!" For he could not hear the music to which they danced.

To be possessed of the desire only for God is to be judged crazy or eccentric, like Francis of Assisi stripping naked in the public

square of his father's town. It is to be accounted dangerous by the moral guardians of society, as when the Inquisition imprisoned Ignatius of Loyola, who asserted that God could be found in this world. This hunger for God makes us fools for Christ's sake, and lets us share in the passion the Father has for his Son and in the passion the Son has for the Father. That passion to say yes to life, to make the leap of faith in every moment of life, and to return to the marketplace bearing gifts is the Spirit.

The path of the Beatitudes always returns us filled with the Spirit to a world to be transformed. We leave that world because it does not satisfy our needs; in that journey, we discover the dead we carry with us and experience the humility of the powerless who have been saved. The zeal our transformation engenders is tempered into a mercy that makes us one with God in compassion for the world. Living compassionately in this world, we manifest the prophetic presence, being living words of God, companions of Jesus. In each stage of the path, there are trials to be endured. Each stage brings a death and a resurrection. Then, like Paul, "We rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our

hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:3-5).

Through the Beatitudes, our devotion becomes the sacrifice making the world holy, and unites us in the embrace of God. In living that embrace, we live not for ourselves or through ourselves. When we fully commit ourselves to life, the lives we lead are Revelation for others. Then, Christ lives in us and through us.

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall it be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light shine before all, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Our desire is that all may have life and have it to the fullest. In that desire for fullness of life, every death is embraced so that it becomes the door to a deeper and fuller life. This life is a gift always offered to everyone.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. How are you to live here and now?
2. What do you need to live that life?

3. Which beatitude gives you the greatest consolation? Which beatitude challenges you the most? What does this tell you about your path and about your shadow?
4. How do the people you admire live the Beatitudes? How do you live the Beatitudes?
5. What is the concrete relationship between the Beatitudes and your daily life, the way you see yourself and others, the ways you share life and make decisions?
6. Where are you now?
7. What work needs to be done to continue your experience of being loved into life by God?

Scripture Passages for Prayer

Psalm 42 and 24

John 21

John 1:13-23

Luke 21:1-4

Acts 2:1-28

Mark 3:13-35

Oscar Wilde, in his essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” says, “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing.”

Every true map of the world contains utopia. We set off looking for it, and when we arrive, we find that that it is not what we desire. And so we set off again. We are driven by desire. Do we know what we desire? How do we satisfy our desire?

Do we think that the kingdom of God is just a utopia? If we cannot satisfy our desire, can we allow God to do so? How can we do that?

Questions about the Beatitudes

1. Journeying through the Beatitudes carries us out of one story into another. We move from one set of desires to another. What are the elements of the old story (call it Act I), that you experience in your life?
2. What do you imagine the new story to be like?
3. Why do you not know the new story as yet?
4. What happens when you project (call it Act II) the dynamics of the old story onto the new story?
5. What has to be given to you to start the new story?
6. What elements of that new story have already been given to you? What do you desire now, having gone through the Beatitudes?
7. What desires you?

Question about The Path Through the Beatitudes

The eight Beatitudes are listed below, along with some statements you've been given about them.

A: The poor in spirit:

“We are broken intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, communally.”

“Poverty of spirit is liberation from illusion.”

B: Those who mourn:

“Acknowledge the presence of the dead in our lives.”

“Become conscious of the ways the dead influence our thinking and acting.”

“To mourn is to enter into community.”

C: The gentle:

“Face our own vulnerability and also the powers of this world, without becoming paralyzed or trapped by fear – our own or others’.”

“To be gentle calls us to be attentive and to be responsible for the transformation of the oppressor and the oppressed.”

D: Those who hunger and thirst for justice:

“Commit to life, not only for ourselves, but for all.”

“How we treat ourselves and others manifests not only what we love, but how we love.”

E: The merciful:

“Mercy strives to love its enemies, expecting nothing in return.”

“To be merciful is to take the risk that we will be taken advantage of.”

F: The pure in heart:

“Our deepest desire is from God and moves us to be companions of Christ.”

“The pure of heart, by the simple act of being present, heal the afflicted.”

G: The peacemakers:

“To make peace is to create community.”

“The path of the peacemaker leads to the broken and hard places of our own life, community and world.”

H: The persecuted:

“When our hearts are filled with longing for the kingdom, that longing shapes everything we do. We hold values different from the world’s.”

“That passion to say yes to life and to return to the marketplace bearing gifts is the Spirit.”

The path

When we enter our poverty of spirit prayerfully, we move towards liberation. In that movement we discover the traps that

stop us from experiencing gratitude at being embraced by God. So we pray to be liberated from those traps, the deaths that take away our joy. As we pray to mourn, we discover more freedom. That freedom allows us to admit that there are still areas in our life where the dead have taken over and we are possessed by violence. We pray to have that violence transformed into creativity, and discover the creativity that seeks conversion of heart. When we discover our lack of conversion in so many areas, we cry out to God for mercy. Knowing what it is to be a sinner, we judge no one else. In fact, we then work to bring ourselves and all to that simple path where we acknowledge that not only we, but all, are loved and lovable. This purity of heart makes us peacemakers, makes us willing to enter into the struggle for a world where all can live their identities as “the beloved.” Such a struggle is not without its sufferings, but we accept those sufferings in union with Christ and all who do good, because that creativity is the expression of our identity. It witnesses to the meaning of our lives. It allows us to restore, and re-story, the world as imagined by God.

The path through the Beatitudes makes us co-creators of the community that extends through all time and all space, and incorporates everyone and everything. Here all are loved and can

share love freely and simply and joyfully. To walk this path is to open and live the gift of intimacy with a God who desires us.