

Blessed Are the Merciful

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On the face of them, the Beatitudes seem to tempt us with a theological problem: do they call for a human action that results in an action of God? That should seem to contradict the principle that “by grace we are saved. By the gift of God.” Be merciful to your fellow humans, and then you will receive mercy from God.”

Read it thus and you are captured by a cause-and-effect version of the Beatitudes which is at odds with the very concept of “blessing” as mentioned so frequently in both testaments in hundreds of occurrences of the words *blessing*, *bless*, and *blessed*. In almost every occurrence, there is implied a giver and a receiver. The passive voice in “blessed” seems to imply the same. Here the imaginative translation of Eugene Peterson seems to resonate with both the teachings of Jesus and our own human experience: “Blessed are you when you care. At the moment of being care-full you find yourself cared-for.”¹

That way of understanding all eight beatitudes fits my experience of trying to practice a vocation we call ministry. Many are the times when a pastor of a congregation seems called to enact a ministry of mercy towards the mourning, the spiritually hungry, strugglers with interpersonal conflicts, and those suffering from alienations akin to persecution. Time after time such human needs escape the self-confidence of a pastor. In wrestling with this fact as a pastor I often remembered the word of William Oglesby, professor of Pastoral Care in the 1950s at UTS-Virginia: “When the call comes from someone desperate for your help, you may have no idea of what to do. But there is one thing you can do: just GO.”

I remembered that word once when a devastated wife in our congregation phoned me with awful news: “He has killed himself!” It was my first encounter with suicide. How to do anything “beatitudinally” in such a despairing moment? Well, I had to go, and in the going—in being present to that new widow in her devastation—something of mercy was given and received in the spirits of both pastor and parishioner. It was for me a version of the experience of the country priest described by Bernanos as “a miracle of my empty hands,” a fulfilment of Jesus’ promise that those who lose their lives in following him and in being a neighbor to one’s neighbors will find their lives. Put differently, the path to human fulfillment is a path on which one must put one’s feet before knowing where that path leads. This is the way of Abraham, who did not know where he was to go. (Hebrews 11:8), but he went! It is the way of disciples who accept an invitation to “follow” before as followers they know what is in store for them. Perhaps it is also akin to the New Testament’s idea of “doing the truth” before you can conceptualize it. In all events, it is a unity of giving and receiving that seems to dominate all eight of the Beatitudes.

It seems to dominate other teachings of Jesus, too. In the adjoining chapter of Matthew, he offers us a version of authentic prayer that ends with a line that has often puzzled some of us: “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you.” But if you refuse forgiveness to your neighbors, “then....” You misunderstand and incorrectly respond to the gift of divine forgiveness if you

do not spend it in service to your neighbor. An italicized version of this postscript to the Lord's Prayer comes in Matthew 18 with the parable of the king's servant who is beneficiary of a million-dollar kingly forgiveness but who promptly ignores the meaning of the gift for his own local relation to a fellow servant (Matthew 18:21-30). It is a terrifying story that ends in a punishment for crime in the form of a cruel sentence to debtor's prison.

When I meditate on that parable in the midst of news about prisons in American society, I have to tremble. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its people than does any other country on earth, for a total of some 2.2 million. Prison is our "default option" for dealing with much human misbehavior. Isolated from the rest of us, those two million prisoners can then mostly commit crimes against each other and their prison guards. Research tells us that imprisonment minus opportunity for education and medical therapy has little effect on reducing post-imprisonment crime. Furthermore, former prisoners, once released, learn that in many ways, a return to this American society is a return to prison: the prison of exclusion from jobs, exclusion from public housing, and inclusion in a special section of the public that requires badges on their identity as "criminals." So for prisoners behind the bars and others released from the bars, this society is likely to be experienced as merciless. And a merciless society is not really a society.

No American poet has written with more conviction on this matter than Robert Frost in his poem "The Star-Splitter," about a farmer who becomes so fascinated with astronomy and so wants to buy a telescope that he burns down his own barn for the insurance money. The police and the insurance company discover his crime, and he goes for a year to prison. When he comes back to town, his neighbors have to decide how to treat him. At first they shun his company and make no attempt to befriend him. But then they have a second thought:

The first thing next morning we reflected
If one by one we counted people out
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long
To get so we had no one left to live with,
For to be social is to be forgiving.²

One might say too that "to be merciful is to be social." For a society completely lacking in mercy is scarcely a society worth living in. Put every driver in jail for exceeding the speed limit by as much as 2 miles, and who among us drivers would be out of prison? Punish every little cheating on one's income tax, and how large must the IRS have to be to catch us all? And how oblivious we would have to be to what Reinhold Niebuhr called "the one provable fact in the New Testament: 'All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.'" (Romans 3:23) To be sure, there are crimes that may deserve prisons for the protection of the public, but to think of prisons as housing a special brand of human beings who break laws is a violation of what Christians are supposed to know about us all and about our common need for the blessedness of mercy.

There is a great, consistent reciprocity in God's way of dealing with humanity: that is the message of the Beatitudes. The divine giving is closely aligned with the human receiving. You cannot have the wealth of the mercy without spending it on

your neighbor. It is one secret of the Kingdom of God.

In many dimensions we Americans tolerate a criminal justice system that is both unjust and merciless. Hopefully in today's America, there is some movement towards more mercy and less sheer punishment in public and legislative concern about our criminal justice systems. Take the strategy of solitary confinement: we are currently building some prisons that have only cells for that way of dealing with misbehaving inmates. A little imagination is sufficient for any of us to begin feeling the horror and irrationality of this practice. For the crime of disrespect for one's neighbors, we deprive the misbehaviorer of the company of neighbors. We confine the misbehaviorer 23 hours a day to a lonely cell, and we vary the punishment from days to years. A prison chaplain, a friend of mine, testifies that solitary confinement results in drastic deterioration of a prisoner's personality. From that fact a commission of the United Nations has prescribed a "Mandela rule" for solitary confinement in the world's prisons; the rule is to permit it for no more than 15 days. It is a rule that resonates with the experience of Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in South African prisons for his opposition to Apartheid laws. In a great irony, Mandela testified in his autobiography that his warders "made a great mistake" by requiring these political prisoners to work together in their "hard labor." In that work they were able to communicate with each other and to help each other in such basic ways as teaching each other to read and write. Some, including Mandela, learned to understand law and history books that lay behind the power of their enemies to imprison them. In these years of confinement, Mandela himself discovered that some of the white prison guards had family problems that needed to be understood and talked over, with the result that one of the guards became so real a friend of Mandela that in 1994, he invited the guard to Mandela's inauguration as president of the new South Africa. It was a remarkable demonstration of blessed mercy: a gesture by a former prisoner who came to know his captor as a fellow human being.

Such glimmers of hope break out in human life when we take to heart the wisdom and promises of the beatitudes. Memorable for me was the gathering of New Yorkers in Yankee Stadium a few days after the horrors of 9/11/01 when my colleague James Forbes was assigned the privilege of reading the Beatitudes of Jesus as part of that day's liturgy, promises of blessing in the midst of the horrors of the murder of more than three thousand Americans and neighbors from over 30 countries. If at any time in recent history we knew that a world without mercy is a world we humans cannot survive in, it was this time in 2001 amid the wreckage of a World Trade Center and devastations of families caught up in hatreds alleged to be justified by distortions of politicized religion.

Reflecting on such historical events, we Christians do well to repair to the blessedness promised us all in those Beatitudes. The mercy we need is both a gift and a power to imitate it. It is the blessed reciprocity of mercy truly given and truly received.

Notes

1 The Greek *makarios* means "happy," but the Hebrew *barak* seems to qualify as a synonym well translated as "blessed," which implies, as often in both Testaments, a giver and a receiver of blessing. That implication seems to fit the whole of the Beatitudes, and it avoids a facile subjective American use of the word *happy*.

2 *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), 176-179.