

Beatitudes IV Aug. 27, 2017 Matthew 5:1-12 Mercy & Forgiveness

I like to think of the Beatitudes as 'The Beautiful Sayings of Jesus.' I find them beautiful because they speak light and hope and possibility into the depths of hurting, broken and vulnerable places of our humanity.

Pondering on the ways of life, Poet, William Stafford once wrote, (*The Way it Is*)

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see. While you hold it you can't get lost. Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread.

The people amongst whom Jesus teaches, preaches, and heals are, by and large, a people who are oppressed by the political, social, and religious structures of their own time and place. Their lives are difficult, and often painful. Today, they might be compared to those who hear the sounds of their own lament in the shouts of "Black Lives Matter." They struggle to see any way into a better future and fight daily against falling into hopelessness, despair, anger, or cynicism. They are looking for, and sometimes holding on for dear life, to the thread that Stafford speaks of.

Far too many people know what it means to be discouraged as they are passed over repeatedly for good jobs with fair wages. They fear for their children's future as they struggle to house, feed, and clothe them adequately. They long to be able to offer the support of a tutor when their children struggle academically; or an opportunity to play hockey, enrol in a dance class, or take swimming lessons, but they cannot. Too many grieve as they witness friends, neighbours and family members, one by one fall into hopelessness, addiction, violence, and untimely death. There is a hunger and thirst for real justice—a deep inner plea for mercy as they find themselves seen as a threat, pulled over without cause, unjustly accused, arrested, and sometimes abused by those pledged to protect them. One of the most heartbreaking things I have heard in recent years are the instructions that young parents of colour must give to their children as they move into their teens about what to do and say and what not to do or say when (not if) stopped by the police.

This is the kind of world, and these are the kinds of people to whom Jesus speaks on the mountainside on that day. I see these sayings of Jesus as beautiful because they are not a prescription for those of us struggling to survive and make sense of our daily lives (and aren't we all?); rather they are a description of the richness of life that is possible, even in the midst of difficult times and circumstances-- if one has the eyes to see, if one can only find and grasp the thread. Jesus declares them, and by extension declares us blessed, honoured, beloved, by God—not just when things are going well, but especially in those times when we least expect it. We are called 'blessed' not in our comfort and prosperity, not in our personal perfection; rather in the midst of our pain and difficulty, and in our yearning for justice, wholeness, and for peace.

When we face complex, challenging, and sometimes painful realities in our lives, we are encouraged by these words towards giving and receiving blessing. All of us suffer—and the same time all of us yearn, in one way or another, for a life that is fuller, freer, and flourishing. The thing is, we sometimes forget that our flourishing is tied up with one another's—and with the flourishing of the whole world.

Mystics of every great spiritual tradition will tell you in one way or another that there is a deep unifying impulse that runs throughout creation and holds us together. Nineteenth century Celtic teacher, Alexander Scott, taught that the royal garments of his day were woven through with a costly thread of gold. If somehow the golden thread were pulled from the garment, the whole garment would unravel. So it is, he said, with the image of God woven into the fabric of our being. If it were taken out of us, we too would unravel.

As trees all over Toronto have been growing and greening all around us, I've been hearing and reading random stories about trees. One I read recently was in a book by John Philip Newell who writes of the Banyan Tree. In India, the shelter of Banyan tree has been a place of meeting, of commerce, of community, and of worship. In the Hindi tradition, it is considered a Sacred Tree.

Apparently after the great trunk of the Banyan grows up at the centre, branches and areal roots grow outwards from the center at the top of the trunk and tip downwards at their tips. Then the aerial root tips work themselves into the ground surrounding the centre trunk, and grow new trunks up from those roots, providing a circle of shelter.

Newell shares the story of a community that decided to clear the areal roots and their developing trunks from under their Banyan trees. They were looking for a cleaner more open appearance. A severe storm hit town, and the once sturdy Banyans, now without their strong supporting roots and trunks were mercilessly ripped from the ground.

Last Sunday, someone came up to me after the service and said that really it was simple. It was all about love. What else did we really need to say? The thing is, love that stands without a vast array of expression, is a little like those banyan trees without their aerial roots and trunks. It's great to talk about or even feel loving, but if we don't know how to root that love through the activities of our daily lives, if there are no branches, if there are no aerial roots going out from the center and rooting in the soil around it, an abstract concept of love will not withstand the storms that life inevitably brings.

That's where things like forgiveness and mercy come in. We are all in need of these things. We need to learn to give and receive forgiveness, we need to learn how to open ourselves to and extend to others mercy. Without the flow of these two, relationships will not thrive because none of us is perfect, and none of us is self-sufficient. We need one another. We need relationship. And, we need community if we are going to truly thrive in this world. These two (forgiveness and mercy) are, of course, tied closely to earlier blessings pronounced upon, 'those who know their need (for forgiveness, for love, for acceptance, for healing),' upon 'the humble (who can acknowledge, accept, and express that need),' and 'those who weep' (who know what it is to love and to lose someone or something precious, and still be willing to open out to love again).

This, I think, is the dream of God for us--and perhaps our dream for one another. We glimpse it from time to time—experience it here and there, in the relationships in which we are blessed to find ourselves. At the same time, it is also true that there are those who have hurt us so deeply, that try as we might, we cannot seem to find it in ourselves to forgive. While in time we may find our way to forgiveness, it is possible that we may never get further than the desire to forgive, and can only pray that that is enough. Of course, sometimes, it is we ourselves, who have said or done something regarded as unforgivable by someone we care deeply for. We can apologize, we can try to explain, we can try to make things right; but sometimes the only thing we can do is wait for a forgiveness that may never come, and move on as best we can.

The Casa del Sol version of the Beatitudes says, "Blessed are the forgiving for they are free." I would add, "Blessed are the forgiven, for they are also free." A lack of forgiveness in any direction is always a place of pain, a sensitive spot that never really goes away. Perhaps that is why Christianity has placed so much emphasis on forgiveness and the assurance that God always has compassion for us--God always forgives!

Newell speaks of our deep need and desire for *union*—within our own selves, with one another, and with God. He reminds us that, union is a very different goal than private perfection, which in any case none of us will reach.

The Beatitudes, and the stories and teachings of Jesus that flow from them and through us are like those branches and aerial roots of the Banyan Tree. They provide a place of shelter, of meeting, of community, and of strength as we learn how to live into our love for one another, ourselves, and for our world. Like Stafford's thread, they give us something to hold onto as we find our way through the complexities of life on earth. Like the golden threads woven through the royal garments of Alexander Scott's 19th day, they hold us together in beauty.

1(John Philip Newell, *Christ of Celts*, Jossey Press, San Francisco - 2008, p 2-4)
<http://heartbeatjourney.org/books/>)