Beatitudes as Spiritual Steps

Today is the feast of All Saints!

Today is the day when we remember the saints in our lives who make up the great cloud of witnesses in God's nearer presence.

And it's also the day to stop for a moment.

To take stock of where we the living find ourselves on our own spiritual journey.

To help us with that stock taking we're given the great grace of our gospel lesson, known as the Beatitudes; the Blessings.

If you've ever spent any time with these blessings, the first thing you may think is how weird it is to call such things "blessings."

Poverty of spirit?

Mourning?

Meekness?

Hunger and thirst?

Really Jesus?

At first glance, these blessings seem to be a kind of random collection of life's circumstances, unconnected to one another.

Until we sit with them for awhile.

And what emerges is that these life circumstances that Jesus walks us through aren't random at all!

Rather, they're steps along the way to what we might call spiritual maturity.

Much like 12 step programs, which lay out a path from brokenness to wholeness, the Beatitudes seem to be doing exactly the same thing.

Which, I think, is why Jesus starts this journey by blessing the "poor in spirit."

"Poor in spirit" asks this question:

How do we get out of our ego self so we can connect with our true self?

Jesus mirrors this first step in his own life.

As soon as he's baptized by John in the Jordan, where does he go?

He goes to the desert — the place that actually and symbolically represents emptiness, stillness, the surrender of self.

And there he stays — for 40 days.

Bible-speak for "a very long time."

It's the place where he confronts not only his demons, but ALL demons.

And it's to the desert that we are each of us called to begin our own spiritual journey.

"Poor in spirit" means realizing — I can't do it on my own!

"Poor in spirit" is that very first step in cracking open the hard shell of the ego, which, at least for me, is a very tough nut to crack!

Perhaps that's why the second step, the second blessing, invites us into mourning.

Loss, whether of a spouse to cancer, a child to an accident, a marriage; even a job or one's reputation, seems to be a necessary pathway to spiritual maturity.

Mourning takes a step beyond spiritual poverty, because mourning happens NOT when we freely surrender control, but when control is ripped from our grasp.

That involuntary tearing away of control creates a more radical emptying.

Because it's unwanted.

Because it's uninvited.

And yet there it is.

Real mourning, with its' pain and despair, seems to be the farthest thing from a blessing that we can ever imagine.

And yet, mourning is vital preparation for that next step in spiritual maturity.

Because mourning helps us to become meek.

Because mourning rips away our illusions of control.

We begin to see that we are not "all that."

We begin to understand the story of the woodsman who takes his only son on a hunt, only for the boy to be killed by a wild animal.

When he returns home, heart broken, he asks his wife to take an empty
pot to every neighbor throughout the village, and ask from all those
who never suffered tragedy, to put food in the pot.

The wife returns after making those rounds.

The pot is still empty.

And so the woodsman tells his wife, neither have we escaped tragedy, as he shares the news of their son's tragic death.

To become meek is to recognize our solidarity in suffering with one another.

It's to realize that even if suffering hasn't yet entered our door, chances are, it will, before all is said and done.

Meekness comes when we remember that but for the grace of God, we are all of us nothing more than walking piles of future dirt.

But for the grace of God.

Meekness allows us to experience the sharp elbows of our neighbors and fellow citizens with a sense of compassion and understanding — if
for no other reason than the deep knowledge that we are none of us getting out of this life alive.

But make no mistake!

Meekness doesn't mean weakness.

Indeed, the fruit of meekness, genuinely lived, is a thirst for justice and peace and reconciliation in this world.

When a recent news article told of a group of Black men who are arming themselves in response to chronic police and white supremacist violence, my first reaction was to marvel that the Black community has NOT resorted to all out violence given so many years of oppression and vicious racism.

Our Black brothers and sisters constantly demonstrate a profound understanding of the Jesus inspired meekness that leads to the creation of a just and peaceful and reconciled community.

Whether it's the civil rights movement of the mid 20th century or the
Black Lives Matter movement today, the overwhelmingly non-violent insistence that our social structures and social attitudes must change —
reflects the truth that meekness gives birth to a thirst for righteousness.

And that thirst can only be satisfied with our next step along the way: the embrace of mercy.

Vengeance only gives birth to more vengeance.

Hate only creates hate.

But mercy, the off-spring of compassion, provides a new fertile ground, from which seeds of harmony can blossom.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" leaves the whole world blind and toothless.

But mercy creates the possibility of a new day.

And when we live in a state of mercy; toward others, toward ourselves, the venom which used to poison our relations seeps away, and a purity of heart emerges, the next to last step on our spiritual journey.

And lo and behold, what is the natural consequence of a pure heart, but to become peacemakers?

It's the natural consequence because we begin to see that the anger and hate and prejudice in this world is most often not a consequence of some kind of pure evil —but rather the consequence of other people's pain.

It is nearly always the case that those who lash out do so from a place of deeply buried anxieties, long forgotten abuse, abandonment and rejection.

And when we can see what first seemed to be nothing more than inexcusably hateful bile is instead the pus of still festering wounds, we can approach the wounded one with the antiseptic of understanding,
rather than with indignation or scorn.

Once we arrive at this last step of spiritual maturity, Jesus is quick to remind us that not all will be wine and roses — at least not
in this life.

The person who comes to the place of being a peacemaker; a place that encompasses all of the previous steps, is certain to experience enormous pushback from the powers that be in this world.

Such people are a direct threat to a world which worships power, privilege, fame and fortune.

Such people are also a threat to the cosmic forces that are the wellspring for so much of what is evil in our world.

And so we see assassinations of folks like Martin Luther King, Jr, of Gandhi, and of lesser known countless others, like the Jesuit priests and Maryknoll Missioners in El Salvador, not to mention the innumerable indigenous people murdered by the forces of greed and oppression.

More recently, as people of good conscience peacefully oppose the indiscriminate arrests made by ICE, many have been arrested and too many have been murdered.

Yet they all have the assurance of our Lord that no matter the harm suffered:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Perhaps most crucially, the beatitudes compel us to ask:

If we're not being reviled by the powers that be, are we truly living out the faith we profess?

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