

Plain But Not Simple

Sometimes the readings we have on any given Sunday can leave us scratching our heads.

There's some of Paul's writings that go on for miles without a comma or period in sight!

Not to mention John's gospel that has Jesus explaining himself as living water or bread or the light of the world.

Wrapping our heads around those kinds of readings often leaves us with little more than a headache.

But then there's today!

With readings that couldn't be clearer if they were delivered with a 2 x 4 right between the eyes.

Let's start with the prophet Micah and what he has to say to us.

Which is: it's not about how many times I say my rosary.

It's not how often I attend church.

And it's not about what I give up for lent.

All of these things have value, to be sure.

But, what really counts is "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Just so, Saint Paul today is crystal clear about what is essential to our faith.

It's facing the fact that God's ways are not our ways.

Which doesn't mean that God prefers blue where we prefer pink.

It means that where we rely on guns and status and money, God relies on surrender, on humility, on letting go.

And lining ourselves up with God's way is the great challenge of our faith.

So how do we do that?

That's where today's gospel comes in!

In many ways, the Beatitudes are like a series of steps to be climbed, over and over again, as we slowly seek to emerge from the rigid cocoon of human values, so that we may grow the wings of God's values.

The Beatitudes, like so many 12 step programs, provide for each of us a path to wholeness.

Which might be why Jesus begins by blessing the "poor in spirit."

Which is another way of saying: "let go of your ego self — in order to connect with your 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!

That place of emptiness.

Of stillness.

Of the surrender of self.

And there he stays for 40 days.

Bible-speak for "a 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 blessing leads to the necessity of mourning.

Loss, whether of a spouse to cancer, a child to an accident, of a job or good health, is a necessary pathway to spiritual maturity.

Mourning is a step beyond spiritual poverty, because mourning happens not when I **surrender** control — but when control is **ripped from** my grasp.

Mourning creates a more radical emptying.

It is unwanted, uninvited.

And yet it appears.

At its worst, it seems to be the farthest thing from a blessing that we can ever imagine.

And yet, mourning is crucial to entering the next necessary step in spiritual maturity.

Because mourning helps us to become meek.

By ripping away our illusions of control, we begin to see that we are not "all that."

We come to personally experience the story of the woodsman who takes his son on a hunt, and the boy is killed by a wild animal.

Heartbroken, he returns home and asks his wife to take a pot from door to door throughout the village, asking from every family who **never** suffered tragedy to fill the pot with food.

The wife returns after making her rounds.

Her pot, still empty.

And the woodsman tells his wife, nor have we escaped tragedy.

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 your door, before all is said and done, it will.

Meekness allows us to face the sharp elbows of our neighbors 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.

As the news broke about the horrific murder of Tyrik Nichols, it was amazing to hear his folks call for only peaceful protest.

I could only marvel that the Black community has NOT resorted to violence for all these many years of oppression and vicious racism.

As a community, our Black brothers and sisters demonstrate over and over again a profound understanding of 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 Black Lives Matter today, their overwhelmingly non-violent insistence that our social structures and social attitudes change — reflects the truth that meekness gives birth to a thirst for righteousness.

And that thirst can only be satisfied by the next blessing: the embrace of mercy.

Vengeance only begets vengeance.

Hate only begets hate.

But mercy, the child 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." Gandhi.

But mercy creates the possibility of a new beginning.

And when we live in a place of mercy, the venom which used to poison our relations seeps away.

And lo and behold, a purity of heart emerges.

Because, what's the natural consequence of a pure heart?

It's to become peacemakers.

The pure in heart become peacemakers because they see that the anger and hate and prejudice in this world is most often not a consequence of evil —but a consequence of pain.

It's nearly always the case that those who lash out do so from a place of deeply buried hurt, of long repressed abuse, abandonment and rejection.

And when we can see what first seemed to be nothing more than hateful bile is in fact the pus of still festering wounds, we can approach those who are wounded with the antiseptic of understanding, with the gauze of compassion, rather than running away or fighting back.

It is at this next to last step of spiritual maturity that Jesus reminds 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 blessings, will experience enormous pushback from the powers-that-be in this world.

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

Peacemakers also threaten the cosmic forces that are the wellspring for so much of what is evil in our world.

And so we see assassinations of peacemakers 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 every day.

Others are jailed, like those old folks who broke into a nuclear weapons base, pouring their own blood on idols of mass destruction.

Like our own Jim Albertini, who's spent a lifetime in the fields of peacemaking, and many years behind bars for doing so.

Because they have all of them remembered the final blessing:

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

Where are you in your spiritual journey?

Are you ready to receive the next blessing?

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