

## **A Beatitude Point of View**

By the Rev. Salying Wong

How many of you have seen a decorated copy of the beatitudes? It usually has some curly vines or flowers or butterflies. But the beatitudes are far from a hallmark moment. They are the gate to the Kingdom of Heaven.

First, let's review the story in Matthew's Gospel. Christmas is over. Jesus grows up and gets baptized by John. While Jesus goes into the desert to be tempted by the devil, John is arrested by Herod Antipas. John indicted the religio-political elites for their corruption, and those very powers would kill him. Jesus takes up John's preaching of repentance, but not in the desert. After gathering his committee, Jesus takes the show on the road, from Capernaum in the north to Jerusalem in the south.

At first, Jesus' message sounded verbatim of John's. "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." But Jesus' teaching on repentance had a different flavor. John's preaching was full of fire and snakes; following him meant being baptized. Jesus, on the other hand, showed the people what repentance was by first healing the crowds and then by teaching them. The first thing he taught were the beatitudes. But, again, lest we domesticate the beatitudes as a hallmark moment, we must read all the way to the end. "Blessed are you when people persecute you and revile you and utter all manner of things against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in Heaven."

In the beatitudes, Jesus lays out his thesis statement and the rest of the Sermon on Mount builds his argument for how God works. Jesus begins with the poor, with God's fidelity to the poor. He tells them, "You saw how I just healed you, how I cast out what tortures you? That's why you're here, right? That's why you've followed me to this mountain. You want to know why. Why did I cure you? Well, I say this, "Blessed are you who are poor, for God is with you. You are children of God.

Blessed means "be encouraged!" So, I say to you who have just been healed, "Be encouraged! God has not forgotten you. God sees you. You are children of God. Yes, you, the poor. You, the meek. You who hunger for justice. You who hunger for God. Blessed. Be encouraged. God is with you. God is on your side."

Liberation theologians call this point of view, "God's preferential option for the poor." We have heard before that the word *metanoia*, translated as repentance, literally means getting a new point of view. Here, we learn that for Jesus repentance is leaving the point of view of power and wealth and taking on the point of view of God—who identifies with the meek, the imprisoned, the

mute, the deaf, the blind. God is on the side of fair treatment, of kindness and mercy to the “little ones”.

Today, more than ever, we need a Beatitude point of view. What news cycle we’ve had?! How many shootings and beatings have we had this week? Closest to home, we hear the terrible story about the farmworkers at Half Moon Bay. We not only tremble with the horror of the shootings at the mushroom farms and ache with compassion for those traumatized. But, now our eyes see and cannot unsee the inhumane conditions the farmworkers have suffered with for so long. Migrants who cannot seek dignified working conditions because of the threat of retaliation, because of their language barrier. We know that farmworkers have been abused. In fact, we knew this and now we must not unknow it. How do we stand with Jesus who stands with the poor? We must listen to Jesus among the poor, calling us to pay attention, to hunger for righteousness, and to be an encouragement.

I would like to close this sermon with some words on “stumbling blocks”. When Jesus uses this term, he talks about his anger at anyone who puts a stumbling block before the “little ones”. The picture is that some vulnerable person, like a child or a day worker, is purposely being hurt by a predator. They see the child and become a predator of that child. They see the migrant worker and steal his wages. They take advantage of their vulnerability for their own gain, sometimes for the sadistic enjoyment of causing harm, of seeing what they can get away with. Jesus reserves his most angry words for these predators. He said they should tie a rope around their throats and throw themselves into the sea. (This is also in the Sermon on the Mount.) This would be better than what he would do with them when he gets his hands on them.

Now consider the contrast of the image to the stumbling block that John the Baptist preached. “Repent for the Kingdom is come near. Make a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up and every hill be level and all shall see the salvation of our God.” This image is the anti-stumbling block. It is the clearing of what could trip someone up. This is how we can follow Jesus. We can help clear the way for God to save.

How could we do that today? How could we remove the stumbling block from someone who is about to be hurt? How can we stop those who are purposely tripping up the vulnerable? There are many acts of mercy, from charity to justice making, and all work toward this vision of the mountains made low and the valley lifted up. Today, let us make a clearing so the vulnerable can be encouraged—So that when the beatitude is spoken, “Blessed are the poor, for they will be called children of God,” it is descriptive rather than aspirational. Let us make way as we follow the Way.