

Living The Beatitudes

By Josette Keelor

The first time my dad and brother came to visit me in Virginia, we had big plans for the day. It was a tradition with my dad, on the first Saturday in December, to go to the Shepherdstown Christmas parade in the morning, then return for the holiday gala that night followed by a drive into Sharpsburg, Md., to see the annual luminary display at Antietam Battlefield.

After watching the parade that day, we had several hours to kill before the gala, so we returned to Winchester for a while. We had lunch, I showed them my apartment, and we ate some snacks while watching a movie. Later, on the way back to Shepherdstown, we stopped at the coffee shop where I was working at the time, and I ordered a raspberry mocha. Then we headed to dinner at the Blue Moon Café before the holiday concert at Shepherd College.

But I was now too full for dinner. An hour later, when my food came to the table, I couldn't even look at it.

Thinking over what I would say for this week's homily, I remembered this story. I'm sure it's something we've all done at one point or another—eating too much ahead of an anticipated meal, and then not having any room left to enjoy the meal itself.

It's a huge disappointment. Maybe it's a special event or a dinner out with family. Special occasions come with all sorts of goodies that are freely available all day, but it's the dinner that's on everyone's mind. It's what we've been waiting for all day—maybe all week.

Then comes the big event, only now you're too full on snacks or bread or appetizers. You take a few bites of your dinner, but you can't eat any more.

After all that anticipation, all the work of those who prepared the meal, you're now too full to enjoy it. It makes you feel foolish. It makes you regret all your previous decisions.

One of the lines in today's reading from Luke touches on the idea of hunger, with Jesus telling us that those who suffer hunger now are blessed in God's eyes, for He will reward them later with all they could hope to enjoy.

I'm sure it's a spiritual hunger that Luke refers to, but it's still an idea we can all relate to. The reading speaks of all sorts of sorrows we might face in our lives: hunger, sorrow, ridicule, loneliness. In particular the reading speaks of injustice we might face at the hands of nonbelievers—those who would punish us for our beliefs.

I always interpreted those injustices as intentional on the part of oppressors, but they don't have to be. They could be indirect decisions, like a rich person choosing not to be charitable, or a powerful person choosing not to use his power for good. It's a choice, sure, but it might not be as obvious a choice to such people as it is to those who would benefit from their help.

We can look at the rich and say they need to share their wealth. But how easy is it for a rich person to first recognize themselves as rich, then conclude that they need (or even want) to use that wealth for helping others?

There's the distinction that I think is at the heart of today's third reading.

We all know The Beatitudes for their repetition of words: Blest are they, the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of God. Blest are they who show mercy, mercy shall be theirs. Blest are they who hunger and thirst, they shall have their fill.

It's a reading that gives hope to those who are suffering, because it makes us feel vindicated. It recognizes our suffering and makes us feel there might be a reason for our struggles—or at least that our belief in God's grace and mercy will bring eventual reprieve.

"Rejoice and be glad," Jesus tells us. "Yours is the kingdom of God." These words are true for those who not only believe in God, but also believe that He will ease our physical hunger with metaphysical food. He will ease our human pain with spiritual balm.

In this reading, Jesus tells us that our earthly suffering will not go unnoticed by God. It's a comforting feeling that I think is meant to give us hope.

But there are other layers to The Beatitudes. They don't merely speak of those who suffer now; they also speak of those who have enough.

'But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.'

²⁵ 'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.'

'Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.'

It's a discouraging thought for those who maybe do have enough to eat, enough clothes to keep warm, enough friends to keep from being lonely. We might ask what we're supposed to do about that...get rid of our food? Give away all our clothes? Are we not supposed to be happy?

No, that's not what it's saying. This reading has many layers. It offers hope for the hopeless, and, yes, it should also inspire generosity in those who have enough. But I think it also cautions those who have enough.

It's not simply a prediction that those who have enough at the moment will be hungry at the end of their lives. It's a warning that earthly food is not the same as spiritual food. There's an underlying message in this reading that on Judgement Day, those who have filled themselves with superficial earthly ideals of snacks, bread, or appetizers will not have room left for the heavenly meal that awaits them at our father's table.

It's a paradox of our society that we strive for earthly wealth even though we can't take it with us when we die. But while we strive for all this stuff, all this food, all this recognition and glory from our peers, we also make ourselves less and less capable of understanding the type of wealth that awaits us in heaven.

Those who have enough on earth are less likely to comprehend what it means to have enough in heaven. And that's why those who have their fill now will feel empty when they meet God at the end of their lives. They will have filled up on meaningless bread, and now have no room left for the wonderful meal that would have awaited them, and which they now cannot stomach.

But there's also hope in today's reading, not only for those who suffer on earth, but also those who would be doomed to suffer in the afterlife, if they don't change their ways. The key here is God.

If you have any knowledge of 12-Step programs, you might know the first three steps are about letting go and letting God.

Step 1 reads, "We admitted we were powerless over addiction and that our lives had become unmanageable."

Step 2: "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

Step 3: "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood him."

Many who join a 12-Step program, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, are annoyed when they first get there. They don't want to give up what they know and enjoy. They don't want to be different from all their friends and family who can enjoy these things without the problem of addiction. Maybe most of all, they feel like failures for not being able to handle their addiction on their own.

But someone I know once said that she's glad to "have to be" in 12-Steps because of the level of counsel it gives her. In fact, she wishes everyone could be in some sort of program, because everyone could benefit from the kind of connection with their higher power that the program stresses.

Steps two and three, especially, stress that need for a power greater than ourselves to guide us to sanity—first through believing that a higher power even exists and can help us, and next through deciding that this power greater than ourselves can free us from the bondage of self.

There's even an unofficial shorthand for the first three steps:

"I can't. God can. I think I'll let Him."