

The first time I went to a counselor, he asked me what I hoped to gain by meeting with him. I told him that as I looked back on the timeline of my life, I could see these points of pain that stuck out from everything else. It was as though my life had a story line that made sense until these things happened that felt like downed powerlines, laying on the road, just waiting to zap whoever goes near them. I said I wanted to be able to tell a story that draws a single line through all the points of my life, including those live wires, to integrate them into a larger story. How do you integrate the negative experiences of your life into a larger vision? That is what the Beatitudes are all about. That's what the Gospel of Matthew is all about. That's what spiritual growth is all about. The Christians to whom Matthew was originally written lived in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction in 70 AD, a tragedy of indescribable proportions. The Temple was the meeting place between heaven and earth. It's where forgiveness of sins was assured, where God and humanity met, and now it's gone. Who are we now? If they were going to continue as a community of faith, they needed to integrate this unexplainable loss. We need to do the same in our lives as well.

Like Moses before him, who led the people to Mount Sinai where they received the 10 commandments, Jesus leads his people to a mountain where he speaks 9 words of blessing that we call the Beatitudes. You should know that the Beatitudes are not if-then statements. Jesus is not saying, if you are poor in spirit, then you'll receive the kingdom of heaven. These are not recipes for how to receive God's blessing. No, the Beatitudes are Jesus speaking blessings over people who appear to be anything but blessed: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and the persecuted. If these are blessings, no one wants to receive them.

A blessing is something we understand as a gift in one's life. We are all blessed with many gifts, material, relational, and spiritual. But what holds blessings together is that we recognize them as something we desire. But no one wants to be poor in spirit. No one wants to grieve and mourn. And meekness? Who here thinks that's a compliment? Wow, you are so meek! The problem with the Beatitudes is they don't appear to be blessings at all. In fact, to tell someone else, "I know you've lost your loved one, but I want you to know how blessed you are," well, that's just wrong. Surely, Jesus isn't doing that. Something else is going on here.

The Bible emerges from an honor/shame culture. Honor and shame are understood to be positive and negative values conferred by the community. Honor is something to which individuals can aspire but only communities can bestow. The opposite of honor is shame, wherein the community looks upon you with disapproval. These are social values given by others, not to be confused with self-esteem, which is about how an individual feels about themselves. A scholar named K C Hanson takes this framework of honor and shame and places them on the Beatitudes. He translates Jesus' words as, "**How honorable are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**" I think that's exactly right. It's not my job, or your job, or even Jesus' job to say

to those who are struggling, you know, you may feel as though your world is falling apart, but actually you're blessed. That doesn't help anyone. But to honor those who are hurting, to honor those who are grieving, that makes all the sense in the world.

One of the best parts about being a pastor is being with people when they are hurting, in the hospital room, or even at someone's deathbed. In these tender, sacred spaces, I never suggest how you should feel or how blessed you are, but I can honor your struggle and your grief. I can tell you how much I respect you, and how when I'm with you, it's like having a foot in heaven right now. That's what Jesus is doing in the Beatitudes. He's not telling us how to feel. His blessings speak honor over those who feel vulnerable, shamed, and dishonorable. He is telling us that those moments of our lives we wish we could erase, God honors those too. They belong too. It's not that you wish them upon yourself or upon others, and it's not that God wishes them upon you, but God respects your suffering, and so can we. The Beatitudes create a container large enough to fit life's most difficult experiences. In them, we discover that our pain has a place. It belongs too. It can be integrated into a larger story, the human story, which includes poverty of spirit, sorrow, and humility. If we don't push our pain away, but sit with it, and honor it, then we discover that struggle connects us to each other.

This past Tuesday, I attended an Interfaith Justice breakfast with colleagues from across the city, and we met at the Church for All People. Do any of you know this church? It's on Parsons Avenue in a neighborhood with all kinds of need. The church serves many functions. They are an emergency shelter when the weather is cold, a warming center during the day. They have a free store of clothing, and a market for fresh vegetables. And people were lined up that morning to utilize all these services. The pastor of the church is a recently transitioned transgender woman, and she welcomed us, and invited us to stay a while after our meeting and spend some time with the people Jesus called blessed. That's the kingdom of God here on earth.

Last week I told you that one way to understand the kingdom of God is to see ourselves as connected to the universal human family, to take our place in the kinship of all creation. God's kingdom is a kingdom where we are connected to one another, and nothing has the capacity to connect us quite like suffering. The truth is that all of us are struggling. Instead of using our pain as an excuse to lash out, kingdom vision recognizes that struggle and heartbreak is just part of being human. It connects us to the great kinship of humanity. If we live long enough, we will go through times in our lives that don't make any sense. They stick out like live wires, threatening anyone who comes near to them. The very first thing Jesus teaches us is that those experiences and those people we consider shameful can all be integrated into the story God is telling, the story in which we all have a place and everything belongs. It's not a simple or quick fix, but if we stop pushing away and denying our pain, if we can learn to sit with it and breathe, we will see that it is through the chaotic imperfections of our lives, our humiliations and heartbreaks, it's through these cracks that the light of grace enters in.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. To be poor in spirit is to be empty inside. It describes those times in life when you have nothing left to give. That's when grace finds you. You see, grace, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and comes to you when you need love most. Those times in your life you've felt farthest from God, Jesus blesses those times too, so that you might know nothing can separate you from God's love.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. To mourn truly is a blessing, because it's only those who have loved and lost who have the honor of mourning. To never mourn means to have never known love, and that would be the greatest tragedy of all. Jesus honors your mourning. He doesn't tell you to cheer up or move on. He joins you in your grief, for there is no love without grief, and love is what connects us all.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Kingdom vision reveals that mercy is at the heart of all things. Richard Rohr says of this verse, "We do not attain anything by our own holiness, but by ten thousand surrenders to mercy. A lifetime of received forgiveness allows us to become mercy. That's the Beatitude. We become forgiveness because it's the only thing that makes sense to us, the only thing that's alive within us. Mercy becomes our energy, our meaning." God is mercy itself, and we live our lives surrounded the great mercy that holds all things together. It is our energy, our meaning.

When we are young, we think that life is about getting what we want. We think that blessings are all about accomplishing our plans, avoiding pain, and achieving success. But as we follow Jesus, we learn that we cannot avoid the negative. You can deny it, but you can't avoid it. And while you don't wish suffering on anyone, the truth is that we never really mature until we've been really hurt. The God revealed in Christ is a God who sees our hurts and humiliations and honors them, a God who isn't afraid of the live wires sticking out on the road of our lives but has the courage and know how to reconnect them to the grid of humanity.

Beloved, the suffering of your life is not an aberration, nor is it shameful. Your pain connects you to the great web of life, the kinship of all creation. May God grant you the grace to see that everything belongs.