

**Beatitudes of Matthew**  
Homily of January 30, 2005  
by Father Jim McGee

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We often call the Gospel verses today “the Beatitudes.” That name rightfully comes from the words we hear – “Blessed are,” – which can also be translated as “happy are” or “Congratulations” such as... “Happy are you who are merciful” or “Congratulations, you who are persecuted for seeking justice.”

But many of us Christians have wrongly understood that if we live out the virtues of mercy, of being poor in spirit, of grieving over loss, of working for right relationships in the call to justice, our promise of reward, of happiness, of blessedness will come after our deaths – a kind of proverbial carrot to hang on through the pain, and darkness, and frustration of earthly life. Not a very tantalizing carrot to keep us committed to living out the Beatitude virtues, is it?

But to understand that the reward we will experience as something we will only experience after death does not fit with what we mean by “heaven.” We Christians believe that eternal life is experienced NOW, that the separation between this earthly life and the one that follows our physical death is but mere illusion. God’s presence and love permeates all of creation. – right here, right now – even amidst our pain and doubt.

The radical message of Jesus’ words today is that the people who society tends to consider weak can be the truly blessed and happy ones. For it is we who acknowledge the pain and suffering and darkness in our lives and throughout our world – we who acknowledge our lack of security, our lack of control, our lack of power, our shortcomings and failures – we who face the darkness and grief head-on – will know true happiness both in the here and now – and in the life to come.

My Beatitude stories:

- MERCY – Age 19, 1974 - home from college; our infamous Saturday night dinners – my raging at Dad for wrongly chastising my brother for something he had not done; I stewed with anger for about an hour in my room. After an hour I sought out my dad and asked forgiveness but refused to compromise the truth – “I am sorry for how I said what I said, but not for what I said – you were wrong. Dad responded in tears to his own anguish of open heart surgery (in 1974 that meant a time bomb of maybe 6 months til death) – and I saw an intimate side of my father I still cherish in memory today. My initiative to reconcile, however meager, gifted me with a healing then and for eternity.
- MOURN – 2 Months after that experience, my dad dies, just 5 days after my favorite uncle died, just 3 days before my brother’s wedding; McGee annual Christmas party – Would there be one as so many of us were devastated with grief and did not want to trigger more sorrow.

My mother announced at Thanksgiving there most certainly would be a party and everyone came – 120 people – the most ever! It was the best party ever- all came transcending their own grief to be present to one another’s sorrow.

Yes, Jesus’ words are most comforting and challenging to us. Frankly, when are they not? It’s darn difficult to show mercy when we have been the one who has been wronged. The invitation to know the abundance of grandeur of life is life-long journey of ongoing conversion. “Congratulations” to those of us willing to try – no matter how meager the beginning...

You see, in the life of faith it is always the beginning. There are no dead ends for a Christian; the end is always the beginning of something immense.

A monk from Thomas Merton’s abbey in Gethsemani, KY once visited a priory in MA where I know several of the Trappist monks there. When one of the monks greeted the visiting monk and took him to the guest room, as they climbed the stairs, he apologized to his brother monk for the many steps

The visiting monk replied to his apology in this way: “There are many steps in Gethsemani abbey, too.” Then he added, “I count them as I climb.... This is how I count them: one, one, one...!”

In the spiritual life it is always the beginning.

If our grief paralyzes us from giving & seeking love, then it is time to take the first step and place our grief in God’s hands and begin risking to love again.

If our anger and hurt paralyzes us from taking the first step to reconcile with another even if they inflicted the wound, then its time to take the first step of mercy...

If the our worry about job and financial security paralyzes into depression at a job loss or demotion or prevents us from taking the risk of moving to a more meaning-filled job, then it is time to take the first step to remember that our security lies in God alone...

If our rejection by others on behalf of our work for justice leaves us brow-beaten and hopeless, it’s time to take the first step to remember that God’s word of justice will not return to God without effect, even if God’s word will not be manifest for another generation to enjoy...

If our body and spirits are crushed by emotional and physical violence, it’s time to take the first step and end the cycle of violence by refusing to respond with violence...

In the life of faith it is always the beginning... And happy, blessed we will be... now... and for all eternity!