

As we mourn the death of our brothers and sisters around the world

Dear friends,

As my team and I navigate how we can use Substack wisely, we were inspired by the long reads available here on this platform for writers and creators. The following is an article I wrote many years ago in 1982, and it is a good starting point for us to enter the new year with renewed hope and perseverance in the face of the challenges we are confronted with today. My website is beatitudescenter.org for more writings, zooms and podcasts that are ready when you are.

Here are the beatitudes, also known as ‘The Sermon On the Mount’ and how I was inspired by them when I spent time over 40 years ago at “The Chapel of the Beatitudes” that overlooks the sea of Galilee:

Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the reign of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons and daughters of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the reign of heaven.

Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

— Matthew 5:3-12

A few months before I entered the Jesuits, in the summer of 1982, I flew to Israel to make a pilgrimage through the Holy Land, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. On the day I left, Israel invaded Lebanon. As I stepped off the plane, soldiers carrying machine guns searched me. I found myself in the middle of full scale warfare.

After nearly a month traveling around Israel, I spent my last week camping along the beautiful Sea of Galilee in the north. There were no tourists, so I spent the days outdoors, swimming in the cool water, watching the sun rise and set, and quietly meditating on the Sermon on the Mount.

Each day, I sat in the small, stone “Chapel of the Beatitudes,” which stands on a hilltop overlooking the Sea. The Beatitudes are inscribed along the church’s eight-sided walls. One afternoon, I read the words slowly and carefully: “*Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those persecuted for the sake of justice, for my name’s sake.*”

I walked out onto the balcony overlooking the Sea of Galilee and the blue sky above, and it suddenly dawned on me: Jesus is serious.

I looked up at the sky and said to God, *“Are you trying to tell me something? Do you want me to hunger and thirst for justice? Do you want me to be a peacemaker? Do you want me to love even my enemies? Alright,”* I declared, *“I promise to work for peace and justice for the rest of my life—on one condition: if you give me a sign!”*

All of a sudden, there were loud explosions and sonic booms as two Israeli jets swooped down from the sky, appearing right over the Sea of Galilee, heading straight at me! They flew directly over me and in a few moments, dropped bombs along the Lebanon border. Trembling, I looked up. *“OK God, I’ll work for peace and justice,”* I said, *“and I’ll never ask for a sign again.”*

Many years later, I know now that people of faith do not ask for signs. But at that moment, I saw the reality of war and death in our world as if for the first time. Even more powerfully, at that moment, in Galilee, at the Mount itself, I heard Jesus as if for the first time saying what he still says today: “The God of peace wants us to live, not to kill; to spend our lives rooted in God, living life to the full, promoting life for all, serving all those in need, loving even our enemies, and working to stop war and injustice.”

Ever since that call in Galilee, the Beatitudes have stood as guideposts on my journey. They summon me, like the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path, to that promised blessing of God’s reign. They direct me like a map along the way of nonviolence. Yet whenever I think I have them nailed down, I discover that they have receded once again into the distance, or rather that my heart has grown colder and I have strayed far from the noble path of nonviolence.

As I ponder God’s spirituality of nonviolence, I marvel at the dramatic contrast the Beatitudes present to the culture’s spirituality of violence. The culture’s anti-beatitudes begin, first and foremost, with the basic rule: “Blessed are the rich; the reign of the world is ours.” The rich rule the world; the poor get poorer and disappear. This is old news. The culture hypnotizes us to pursue money and possessions, power and prestige. But Jesus turns the values of the world upside-down.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that the way of nonviolence is a narrow path that few find, while the road to destruction is wide and many take it. Nonetheless, into the culture of violence, Jesus comes announcing the God of nonviolence and a life-giving spirituality of nonviolence. The Beatitudes, we could say, are the primary text, the basic guidelines of nonviolence.

They challenge us to live every facet of nonviolence just as Jesus did.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus begins. Not the rich, not the powerful, not those in control, but the poor of spirit. They receive the first and greatest blessing—entrance into God’s reign.

Let go of your possessions, your power over others, your prestige, Jesus urges us, and in your emptiness, discover the reign of God. Only as we let go of everything we possess, to the point of giving our lives for others, do we let go of every trace of violence or domination. This is a great and difficult lesson—the beginning of wisdom.

The poor in spirit have learned this first of all. They understand nonviolence by heart.

That is why Jesus begins his life among the poor and calls us to share our lives with the poor, because God's reign shines first in their midst, away from the power and glare of the world. As we share our lives with the poor, Jesus explains, they share with us the one thing they have: the reign of God. So the Gospel pushes us: try to live in greater solidarity with the poor, to share personal relationships with poor people, to let go of power, control and domination, and to taste their poverty of spirit, their powerlessness.

"Blessed are those who mourn," he continues. Millions of people in our world mourn

because their loved ones have been killed by war, starvation or injustice. Do we grieve for those who die in war; for those incinerated by nuclear weapons and bombs; for the 60,000 who die each day from starvation? Do we allow the sorrow of the world's poor to touch our hearts? Do we look the suffering of the world in the eye, and take on the task of ending injustice, or do we turn away in denial, and thus postpone our own inevitable confrontation with grief? As we mourn the death of our sisters and brothers around the world, Jesus promises, God consoles us, and we find a peace, even a joy, we did not know possible.

"Blessed are the meek," Jesus teaches. "They shall inherit the earth." Here we discover the biblical word for nonviolence. Though the world praises the violent, the arrogant, the proud, Jesus invites humility, gentleness, and nonviolence. He challenges us to renounce every form of violence in our hearts and in our world, including war, nuclear weapons, racism, sexism, abortion, the death penalty, guns, greed, consumerism, oppression, hatred, and the destruction of the environment. As we enter into his spirit of creative nonviolence, we receive the blessing of creation itself.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice," Jesus insists. "They shall be satisfied." Be passionate for justice, he tells us. In other words, resist injustice with every bone in your body. As the Jesuit martyr from El Salvador, Ignacio Ellacuria once wrote, "Christians and all those who hate injustice are obligated to fight it with every ounce of their strength. They must work for a new world in which greed and selfishness will finally be overcome." Seeking justice is a constitutive element of our faith. It is a matter of life and death, and thus a spiritual matter. How concerned are we about injustice in the world?, the Gospel asks. How much do we crave justice? To the extent that we struggle for justice, Jesus seems to say, we will find meaning and purpose in our lives. In the struggle itself, Jesus explains, speaking from his own experience, we find true satisfaction.

"Blessed are the merciful; they shall be shown mercy." While we struggle for justice on the one hand, Jesus instructs, we offer mercy with our other hand, especially toward those who have hurt us and seek our forgiveness. Mercy is the very heart of God. Thomas Merton described God as "Mercy within Mercy within Mercy." Be as compassionate, as merciful, as God, Jesus pleads, forgiving ourselves and everyone we meet, including those who have killed our loved ones. Sister Helen Prejean exemplifies this mercy as she befriends those on death row and their families, as well as the family members of the victims. The Gospel paints the summit of mercy in the crucified Jesus' prayer for forgiveness on those who have killed him. Instead of seeking retaliation or revenge toward those who hurt us, we offer forgiveness and compassion. As we share mercy, we sow seeds of mercy, which on the last day, will wash back over us.

“Blessed are the pure in heart; they shall see God.” To be a person of nonviolence, for Jesus, is to be at peace within ourselves. To live with a disarmed heart requires contemplation because only through daily intimate prayer can the God of peace disarm our hearts of our inner violence. “While you are proclaiming peace with your lips, be careful to have it even more fully in your heart,” St. Francis advised. As we cultivate nonviolence of the heart, and root all we do in our relationship with the God of peace, we begin to see God everywhere—in the poor, in the struggle for justice and peace, in our communities, in the gifts of bread and wine, in creation itself, in our

enemies, in one another. One day this pure, heartfelt contemplation will lead us to the beatific vision, Jesus promises. We will see God face to face.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus teaches. Jesus wants his followers to make peace, to end war and to root out the conditions for war. He wants us to reconcile with everyone in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our cities, in our nation and in the world. To make peace, he calls us to renounce war and nuclear weapons, seek disarmament, persistently reconcile with all peoples, and love our enemies. He would bring together people of all races on our city block as well as heal the deep ethnic divisions in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Northern Ireland. Such public peacemaking is hard. Peacemakers like Jesus rarely live to see the fruit of their work. They usually find themselves misunderstood and rejected, if not labelled with every possible epithet. Jesus calls them the sons and daughters of God.

“Blessed are those persecuted for the sake of justice, for My name’s sake. Rejoice and be glad!” This last instruction may be the hardest of all. Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement noted that we can measure our discipleship by the amount of persecution we undergo. For Jesus, the greatest blessing comes in suffering for the noble cause of justice and refusing to retaliate with violence. In that moment, the reign of God is revealed as unconditional, nonviolent, redemptive love. As we are persecuted for speaking the truth; for prophetically denouncing injustice and calling for justice, disarmament and peace; for engaging in nonviolent direct action for social change; we enter into the final blessing of Jesus’ life, the paschal mystery of cross and resurrection.

As we share in the paschal mystery, we not only promote the coming of justice, we welcome God’s reign. We sow the seeds of justice and peace that will one day blossom. As we willingly suffer for justice, refuse to retaliate with further violence, pursue the truth of justice and peace until our dying breath, we rejoice because we share the lot of the saints, the prophets, the martyrs and Jesus himself. In this joy, the nonviolent reign of God is at hand.

The Beatitudes teach us about the mystery of God. As we experiment with the Beatitudes in our lives and plumb the spirituality of nonviolence in our hearts, God does things to us. According to Jesus, God takes initiative. God responds with blessings. God gives us God’s reign; God consoles us; God gives us the earth for an inheritance; God satisfies our longings for social justice; God bestows mercy upon us; God shows God’s face to us; God calls us God’s sons and daughters; God gives us joy; and God offers us the fullness of life in heaven.

We are blessed indeed.

Father John Dear: Blessed Are...

If you made it this far, let me know if you appreciate a long read from time to time from me.

Onward in peace,

 John