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We are delighted that you have come to visit us today. Our fall issue centers on the theme of the Beatitudes, a classic text of the Christian tradition taken from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel according to Matthew. At once challenging and inspiring, the Beatitudes raise many questions: What does it mean to be blessed? Who are the blessed? Do we really find blessing in poverty and meekness, purity of heart, hunger for justice, peacemaking, persecution? How does one live into the vision held forth by the Beatitudes? We hope that by exploring these questions along with our contributors, you may arrive at new insights that will enrich your experience of sacred music, worship, and the arts. If you like what you see here, please share this publication with others. Subscription is free of charge and open to all.

Rita Ferrone, editor

November 28, 2018
In This Issue

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

Our issue on the Beatitudes begins with two articles that consider the Beatitudes as a whole. Peter Hawkins surveys Dante’s brilliant vision of the Beatitudes from the Mountain of Purgatory, and Christopher Irvine explores the embodied reality of blessedness through a reflection on Antony Gormley’s works of sculpture.

In the second section of this issue, our contributors draw attention to each of the Beatitudes, one by one. Cathy George reflects on poverty of spirit and the faith of children, drawing on her experiences of their prayers in the children’s Liturgy of the Word. Swee Hong Lim then takes us to the Global South to show that we have much to learn from believers who create sacred music in some of the poorest parts of the world.

In reflecting on “blessed are they who mourn,” Tom Long invites us into a deeper appreciation of the difference between grief and mourning, and gives us a profound context for understanding the Christian funeral. Teresa Berger then describes a new practice of creating a space for mourning, which turns our attention to the contemporary experiences of displacement, such as is experienced by migrants and refugees.

Michelle Lewis asks how blessings of animals and the cultivation of community gardens can help to put us in touch with the meekness of nature itself and thus enable us to share more deeply in the inheritance of the earth that God promises.

To help us better understand the beatitude “blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice,” we have reprinted a seminal address on “Preaching the Just Word” by the eminent scholar and preacher, Walter J. Burghardt, SJ (d. 2008). He later developed this theme for the Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School. Those lectures were subsequently expanded into a book, published by Yale University Press. It is worth noting that “Preaching the Just Word” also became the title of a series of seminars which he conducted across the United States for more than twenty years. It all started with this text, which we share with the kind permission of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus.

Next, Paul Inwood recounts his extraordinary experience of composing the hymn for the Year of Mercy in 2015. Be sure not only to read this fascinating account, but also to note the video recordings (one in Slovak, and one in Arabic) which show the hymn being performed variously in different parts of the world.

Purity of heart is an essential theme in the story told by Hyuk Seonwoo, whose Korean Methodist congregation has come to treasure the celebration of weekly Communion. Read “Sacramental Jars of Clay” to see how the celebration of Eucharist has invited personal transformation and supported this community’s sense of mission.

The work of transformation is also important to Benjamin Bergey’s essay on building peace through music. Conflict transformation, an outcome of the patient work of building peace at the grassroots level, can be fostered in concrete ways through music. The author shows us how.
Cheryl Cornish’s essay on “blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness” does not let us off the hook of ambiguity in assessing the difference between righteousness and self-righteous behavior. The key—revealed poignantly at a moment in worship—is the cross.

Our closing feature, “One Final Note,” is an extract from a book-length poem entitled *Beatitudes*. This work has been called “a postmodern Sermon on the Mount.” In it, the Canadian poet, Herménégilde Chiasson, describes a longing for heaven in a wide range of everyday moments—interwoven with aches, doubts, tedium, and hope. Both a cry and a prayer, *Beatitudes* is an unfinished litany.

Rita Ferrone, editor

November 28, 2018
On the Cover: The Beatitudes, Illuminated

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

The cover of this issue offers a detail from the page of *The Saint John’s Bible* on which the Beatitudes according to Saint Matthew are illuminated. The detail is taken from the “fractured blesseds” on the right hand side. The full image is reproduced here, below, along with the text. Some information about *The Saint John’s Bible* in general and this page in particular can also be found below.
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom 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 righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
(Matthew 5:3–12, NRSV)

About The Saint John’s Bible

The Saint John’s Bible, commissioned by St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville Minnesota in 1995, is the first completely handwritten and hand illuminated manuscript of the Bible commissioned by a Benedictine Abbey since the invention of the printing press. The Bible, written on vellum, measures two feet tall by three feet wide when open. There are seven volumes, containing a total of 160 illuminations.

The work, produced by several artists and calligraphers, was overseen and carried out by master calligrapher Donald Jackson, in Wales. It was advised by a theological Committee on Illumination and Text. Michael Patella OSB, chair of this committee, commented: “The illuminations are not illustrations. They are spiritual meditations on a text.”

About this Page

The website of The Saint John’s Bible describes this particular page as follows:

... Artist Thomas Ingmire gives special attention to the Beatitudes, writing them with a style and movement that allows the words to become the art itself. The color and electricity
of the page catches the eye; however, it is always the text and its challenging meaning that reaches us.

You see two sides in this special treatment. The right side is a repetitive, jagged, and colorful treatment of the word blessed. The letters are scattered randomly in a multicolored pattern, here and there coming together to form the word. The overall effect recalls mosaic decoration, a traditional artistic medium dating to the pre-classical times in the Near East. It was widely used in early Christian churches for both decorations and narrative scenes. It also reminds many people of the glass windows in Saint John’s Abbey Church.

Although readers notice the gold lettering first, with closer observation they discover fractured blesseds on the right side. Together they express Jesus’ rich teaching in the Beatitudes.
Climbing the Mountain of the Beatitudes

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

When Dante’s writings are considered as a whole, the Christian Scriptures turn out to be the source of more reference and allusion than any other work. By one count, the poet has a total of 575 citations from the Bible compared to his reliance on the near-contenders Aristotle (395) and Virgil (192).[1] Calculations of this sort, however, cannot begin to suggest the extraordinary degree to which Dante absorbed the world of Scripture and made it his own. This is most notable in the *Commedia*, where the Old and New Testaments, either in Latin or in vernacular translation, so permeate his language as almost to become one with it. Sometimes he quotes the Bible openly or draws attention to its relevance; more often, he allows its presence to go unannounced, relying on the reader to catch the biblical reference and make something of it.[2]

*Rather than being a penitentiary . . . purgatory is variously shown to be a hospital for the healing of brokenness, a school for the learning of truth, an incubator where worms grow up to be butterflies, a conservatory where soloists become a chorus and speakers develop a use for “we” and “our” in addition to “I” and “mine.”*

Given Dante’s strong dependence on classical sources in the *Inferno*, along with the rejection of God exemplified among those who have “lost the good of the intellect” (INF 3.18), it should come as no surprise that hell is the least overtly biblical realm of the *Commedia*’s afterlife. Nor is it difficult to see why in *Paradiso* biblical allusion is more common than citation, given that the blessed are so completely “in-Godded” (*Paradiso* 4.28) as to pass beyond the mediation of the Scriptures and enter into the reality they point toward.[3] Where the Bible plays its most explicit role is in the middle space of the *Purgatorio*, with its thirty direct citations and roughly forty allusions. In this realm of time and transformation, the penitent souls (unlike either the damned or the blessed) have not yet reached their eternal destination. They remain *in via*, needing guidance and instruction, prayer and praise, a balance of penitential pain and restorative, renewing worship. They are all about change. Scripture informs the entire process of their becoming born-again.

The presence of the Beatitudes on each of the seven terraces of the *Purgatorio* provides a perfect example of how Scripture makes a contribution to the poet’s hundred-canto script. But before looking at the way they function in the process of purgation, it is important to have in mind Dante’s larger project in the second canticle—his startling transformation of what the medieval church imagined as a terrible (if temporary) underground hell located somewhere within the earth by turning it into a soaring mountain bathed in sun- or starlight, full of music and art, liturgy and pageant. According to the *Commedia*, the mountain formed an island at the antipodes of the inhabited earth, which had Jerusalem at its center. It was crowned by the Garden of Eden, whose whereabouts was much contested in the Middle Ages but was here “resolved” by poetic fiat.

Dante not only gives the middle kingdom a vivid geographical specificity but relates it both to hell, its
mirror image, and to heaven, its sequel. He divides his mountain into three discrete sections, the first of which is an ante-purgatory waiting room. At the base of the mountain he gathers souls not yet ready to begin the hard climb: those who repented only in the last desperate moment of their lives; those who, through sloth, barely repented at all; and those who were so preoccupied with worldly governance that they neglected to prepare themselves for the life to come.

The seven terraces, each devoted to one of the vizi capitali, constitute purgatory proper: pride, envy, wrath, acedia or sloth, avarice, gluttony, lust. The most grievous vices are dealt with first, on the bottom terraces—a reversal of the order of sins punished in the Inferno, which are ranged from least to most culpable. The terraces themselves lie just inside a massive gateway, with an angel guardian and elaborate entry rite that involves the inscription on the pilgrim’s forehead of seven Ps. Each is a sign of the residue of a peccatum that penance is meant to erase—the gradual cleansing of the penitents who present themselves as “marked men.” Once within the gate, repentance begins in earnest with painful self-confrontation and arduous acts of contrition. Yet as the poet counsels his readers on the first of the terraces, the whole point of the process is not pain but gain: “Don’t dwell upon the form of punishment,” he says, “consider what comes after that” (10.109–110).

The “that” on which we are not meant to dwell is a variety of penitential ordeals: the heavy burdens borne on the shoulders of the proud (cantos 10–12), the sewn-up eyes of the envious (13–14), the corridor of purifying fire through which the lustful make their way in (astonishingly, equal!) groups of what we would now call heterosexuals and homosexuals (26). To see each penance enacted, moreover, is to foresee its eventual termination. The proud will cast off their dead weights; the blinded envious will see; the lustful will step out of the purifying fire and into the Edenic Garden that blooms, verdant and welcoming, on the other side of the terrace’s “cammino acceso” (burning road, 26.28).

Rather than being a penitentiary, in other words, purgatory is variously shown to be a hospital for the healing of brokenness, a school for the learning of truth, an incubator where worms grow up to be butterflies, a conservatory where soloists become a chorus and speakers develop a use for “we” and “our” in addition to “I” and “mine.” Unlike the Inferno, where punishment is eternal, in Purgatory lives are renovated, rewritten for eternity. Vices are not so much expunged as cured. The virtues, therefore, constitute a recovered health.

The beatitude not only speaks to the past; it also heralds a new reality, a future in glory.

The Beatitudes come into play at the very end of the soul’s cure on each terrace once the transformed penitent is both ready to leave behind one vice in order to tackle another and, more importantly, ready to acquire yet another virtue as a result of that struggle.

When each successive stage of purgation is completed, the angel who guards the terminus on each of the terraces uses a wing to brush away one of the seven peccati inscribed on the penitent’s forehead. The proud will become humble, the envious generous, the wrathful gentle. As they move up the mountain they come closer to a knowledge of God’s kingdom as revealed by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1–12 (see Luke’s version in Luke 6: 20–38): Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the peacemakers.
Jesus’s Sermon is in many ways at odds with the realities that we daily observe firsthand, where the meek, for instance, typically inherit nothing. It bears out the truth of what Jesus tells Pilate in the Gospel of John: his kingdom “is not of this world” (18:36). What he points to, however, is another world order than our own, one perhaps experienced to some extent on earth (or in paradox) but known fully and perfectly only in heaven, where Mary, for instance, is at once “umile e alta,” humble and exalted (Par. 33.2).

Exiting from each terrace, souls receive a particular beatitude that is appropriate to their new level of understanding. The proud, who were rich in self-regard, learn the freedom that comes with being “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5: 3); the envious become capable of mercy and compassion. The verse of Scripture they hear in song, therefore, signals indirectly the capital vice that has been purged—painfully dislodged sometimes over centuries, but finally erased by the easy brush of angelic feathers. But the beatitude not only speaks to the past; it also heralds a new reality, a future in glory. Vice has been turned into the inclination toward virtue. Step by step along the ascending terraces the penitents anticipate the blessedness that awaits them perfectly in the City of God.

In all cases but one, the beatitudes are indicated by a single Latin word or catchphrase that recalls the entire saying in the Vulgate. In effect, the listener (or reader) supplies the whole verse, which is otherwise recalled only in part. The souls, therefore, complete what the angel pronounces: they are becoming the fulfilled promise of the beatitude. After the purgation of pride, for instance, Dante notes that “‘beati pauperes spiritu’ was sung so sweetly as no words could tell” (Purg. 12. 110–111). Only the initial phrase of the beatitude is given, but in keeping with the common liturgical practice of versicle and response, the proclamation, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” effectively elicits the remainder of the verse: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” All responses are left unvoiced on the mountain because each is embodied in the person of the penitent now entering into a new stage of beatitude. The angel sings the versicle, the renewed penitent is the response.

Dante offers the simple citation of a word or phrase of the Latin beatitude on both the first terrace (the poor in spirit, “‘beati pauperes spiritu’ was sung so sweetly”) and the final seventh (the pure in heart, “he sang, ‘beati mundo corde,’ with a voice more radiant than ours” 27.8). Otherwise, he varies his practice. Sometimes Vulgate quotation gradually dissolves into the vernacular, as on the terrace of sloth when “the angel moved his feathers and fanned us, declaring, ‘Qui lugent’ to be blessed, for they shall have their souls possessed of consolation” (19. 49–51). Elsewhere Latin is dropped entirely, as on the terrace of gluttony, where the angel does not so much translate the Vulgate’s “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” as paraphrase it almost beyond recognition: “And then I heard, ‘Blessed are those whom grace/ illumines so, that in their breasts, the love of taste/ does not awake too much desire –/whose hungering is always in just measure’” (24. 151–54).

The biblical beatitudes are so lapidary in form, not to mention familiar to Christians, that one might think that Dante could have given a Latin incipit in the received language of the Church and simply left it at that. Instead, he chose to translate the Scripture into his poem’s vernacular speech, and bring it into his terza rima rhyme scheme. He decided not only to translate but to expand and interpret—all in
order to bring the Word of God into his own words. Of course, what we “hear” on the terraces is biblical appropriation voiced by angels, who offer the kind of elaboration of sacred text routinely given by ordained preachers speaking Italian from the pulpit (which is no doubt how Dante learned the practice in the first place). Nonetheless, Alighieri is responsible for everything on the page: all the voices ultimately are his. It would be wrong to accuse him of presumption in acting as if he could improve upon scripture by reworking it as extensively as he does throughout the Commedia. And yet, to offer him the caveat of a beatitude, blessed is the poet whose love of his own genius does not kindle pride, and whose hunger for artistic brilliance goes only so far as is just.

Peter Hawkins’ work has long centered on Dante in essays, chapters, and books: Dante’s Testaments, Dante: A Brief History, The Poets’ Dante: Twentieth-Century Reflections, and Undiscovered Country: Imagining the World to Come. He has also published on American fiction (The Language of Grace, The Bible in the American Short Story), and with Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg edited volumes on biblical reception (Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs, From the Margins: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives).

Further Reading


Notes


Citations of the poem are based on Allen Mandelbaum’s translation of the Commedia (1980–82) available online at http://www.worldofdante.org.

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Blessing and the Face of Being

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

A beatitude promises a blessing, but is the blessing for us now, or for after we have died? And if the latter, then we may reasonably ask what of us remains after we have gone? Quite bluntly: what survives after the dissolution of the physical body? There is a multiplicity of possible answers. We could think of what the individual in question has made or achieved—a monument, perhaps, or an enduring foundation and ongoing project that bears the deceased person’s name. There will be the DNA that survives in one’s progeny, and the memories that are held, possibly recorded, by relatives and friends. There are, in other words, physical traces of who we were, such as photographs, things we made, the things we accumulated and valued, as well as a whole array of mental images and memories held by others. But do these do justice to who and what we are as human beings?

The classic Christian view transcends the binary opposition between mind, or consciousness, and matter; it sees the human being as an embodied thinking and feeling subject. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in his taxonomy of what makes a human being human, spoke of how our sense of being in the world was mediated through the five senses.[1] Characteristically, Aquinas arranged these senses in a hierarchy and accorded the sense of touch as the highest. The sense of touch operates through the sensors just below the skin of the physical body. Even the smallest babies reach out to touch, and through the senses of sight and touch infants begin to differentiate between themselves and others and between themselves and the physical objects of the world around them. So, from an early stage in our human development we gain a sense of the “otherness” of other people and realize that physical objects exist independently of us.

The Hebrew Psalmist mused over the question of who we are and asked how the Creator God ranks us in the cosmos. This human creature, he says, is just a little lower than the gods, and is crowned, as Robert Alter translates the Hebrew phrase, “with glory and grandeur.”[2] The regal imagery deployed in Psalm 8 speaks of a God-given and therefore inalienable dignity and value. This resonates with the hymn of creation (Genesis 1:27) in which human beings are described as being made in the image of God. The word translated here as image denotes a shifting shadow cast on the ground, suggesting that the outline of this “human form divine,” is the physical human body.

The contemporary artist whose work focuses on the physical human body, and famously uses casts of his own body, is the sculptor Antony Gormley (born 1950). The expressive quality of these body-shaped sculptures, such as those entitled Critical Mass, is shown in the different postures: some bodies are crouching, some kneeling, and others standing. In this ensemble, Gormley goes even beyond Auguste Rodin’s brilliant achievement in showing a moving human figure,[3] and never more so than in his evocative sculpture Rise (1983/4). Here the slight gesture of the raised head suggests an awakening to face a new day. Perhaps the figure is responding, even now, to a promised resurrection, to the stirring
of that Spirit who raised Christ from the dead and who gives life to our mortal bodies (Romans 8:11). The play between the physical and the mental, the inside and the outside, the inner life and our external appearance, is further explored in his series of nine prints, *Body and Soul* (1990)[4].

*Today, Gormley’s sculpture certainly resonates with the question of what it is to be a saint, a Spirit-filled person, and it fascinates pilgrims and tourists alike. “Whose body is this?” they wonder.*

We all know that the material substance of the body is the means whereby a person exists in the physical world. Indeed, we make our presence felt in and through the body. This presence is more than a question of location, of where we are. It also determines to a significant extent who and how we are as we occupy specific spaces here and there. The work that shows this in a startling way is his sculpture *Transport* (2010), now exhibited in the Eastern Crypt of Canterbury Cathedral. This body-shaped piece, 210cm x 63cm x 43cm, was fabricated from 210 medieval nails saved from the repair of the roof of south transept of the cathedral. The sculpture is suspended by a single translucent cord and floats over the site of the first tomb-shrine of Thomas Becket who was murdered in the Cathedral on December 29, 1170.

In many ways Thomas was an unlikely character to have become a saint, but traces of a Spirit-filled life and death soon attracted increasing numbers of devotees to Canterbury. Today, Gormley’s sculpture certainly resonates with the question of what it is to be a saint, a Spirit-filled person, and it fascinates pilgrims and tourists alike. “Whose body is this?” they wonder. Good art has the capacity to raise important questions such as who we are, and *Transport* certainly does that. For me the definite bodily outline of the sculpture reminds us that the body is not something we have; it is something that we are. “I am a body,” Nietzsche declared, and Paul tells us that it is through the body that we express our
service to God and neighbor (1 Corinthians 6:20 and Romans 12:1).

For those “called to be saints,” living between the time of Christ’s bodily incarnation and the hoped-for resurrection of the body, the body is the site in which the Christian is called to live out the Beatitudes.

As light and air move gently through this floating sculpture we may be reminded that the embodied person in-breathes the very breath of God, giving us the power of movement, thought, and feeling. Put simply, then, the body is the site of consciousness and is not merely a physical shell that we temporarily inhabit. Moreover, for those “called to be saints,” living between the time of Christ’s bodily incarnation and the hoped-for resurrection of the body, the body is the site in which the Christian is called to live out the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–11).[5]

As well as recalling us to the essential bodily dimension of our life, the sculptor evokes the more nuanced question of presence. This is powerfully the case in Gormley’s Another Place (1997), a series of cast-iron figures, now placed at intervals along the shoreline on Crosby Beach in Merseyside, England, and which appear and disappear with the rise and fall of the tide. Each of these solid iron sculptures, exposed to the elements, looks out to sea and faces the horizon, the dawning of a new world.
If we reflect on Gormley’s body-forms, we may find ourselves asking what it means to be present, that is, present to ourselves as embodied spatial beings in time, as well as being truly present to another. The work of the Swiss painter and sculptor Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) provides another poignant statement about presence. In the 1950s Giacometti became well-known for his elongated figures. Each of these attenuated bodies has a distinctive and prominent face, and it is the face that is freighted with meaning here.[6]

Perhaps what the Christian sees in the present is the glance of the Other, the gracious and transforming countenance of God, in the face of Jesus Christ, in and through the Spirit.

Following the work of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, much has been written about how the face is the index of our living honestly and responsible with ourselves, with others, and before God.[7] For Levinas the face was always the face of the other, and this understanding is certainly rooted in the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms. Here, the word variously translated “face” or “countenance” literally means presence. In Psalm 27, for instance, the reader is drawn into a dialogue between the worshiper and God. The speaker is invited to seek God’s face and responds by saying “your face Lord, do I seek.” The reciprocal gaze that is implied here brings us close to a description of a saint as one whose face, in
looking toward the Lord, is radiant[8] and is charged with a greater weight of being. It was the Orthodox theologian Bishop Kallistos Ware who once said that if you wanted to know what a saint looked like you simply had to look at their face.[9]

This brings us back full circle to the Beatitudes, and invites us to reflect more deeply on the sixth beatitude. Blessed, indeed, are the pure in heart, who seek after God, because they will see God. Some may say that this blessing is a future, eschatological reality. It is certainly that. But since the Resurrection of Christ, eschatological realities are reflexive and impinge on the present, on who and what and where we are now. As St. Paul says, now we may see in a glass darkly, but then we will see face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). Perhaps what the Christian sees in the present is the glance of the Other, the gracious and transforming countenance of God, in the face of Jesus Christ, in and through the Spirit.

In Dante’s Divine Comedy, written around 1307/8, it is the glance of the beloved Beatrice that enables the poet to ascend heavenward. The poet is then drawn to the summit by the radiant light of God’s countenance. As he ascends, he encounters the company of the blessed ones, the saints in glory, appearing as a cloud of faces (Canto 30.41, 31.49). It is the picturing of this vision that may recall for us that other, final beatitude: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord” (Revelation 14:13).

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**Christopher Irvine** was formerly **Canon Librarian and Director of Education at Canterbury Cathedral. He is a member of the Society of the Resurrection and currently cares for two rural parishes in East Sussex (UK). He is a Teaching Fellow of St. Augustine’s College of Theology, and he also teaches for Sarum College and the Mirfield Liturgical Institute (College of the Resurrection). He has recently contributed an essay on monastic architecture in Oneness, the Dynamics of Monasticism, and is the author of The Art of God, and more recently, The Cross and Creation in Christian Liturgy and Art (2013).**


[5] The Beatitudes are set in the Lectionary as the Gospel passage for the celebration of the Eucharist on the Feast of All Saints.


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Poverty of Spirit and the Spiritual Life of Children

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

How might the beatitude, “blessed are the poor in spirit,” from Matthew’s Gospel, offer us insight into the faith of a child?

Angelique Roberts was ten years old when she drew the picture of Jesus that hangs on the wall above my desk. Blue crayon colors the sky behind the brown wooden planks that form a cross. There is an orange rectangular sign above his head with the single word—“Savior”—written in deep purple. Circles of lead fill in the nails on the hands and feet of the nearly naked young man drawn in pencil. A stylish short haircut, shaved above the ears, tightly curled and cropped on top, frames his broad facial features, giving him a handsome, distinctive look. Beneath groomed eyebrows, a large oval tear rolls onto his cheek beneath the dark slit of one eye. A bright red heart covers his torso.

Angelique walked over to me, extending her hand with her drawing in it and said, “This is for you. It’s a picture of Jesus.” Most Sundays, as she and her classmates formed a line to return to church from the children’s homily, she raised her hand high as she could stretch it, flapping her fingers back and forth,
hoping to be chosen to carry the basket that collected their prayers and pictures down the center aisle to place it on the altar. As I looked at the picture that she handed to me, she said, “It’s Jesus, and it’s my brother who died. He was so nice, Reverend Cathy. He was my best friend. He didn’t do bad stuff or hang with gangs, and he didn’t have any guns. He always looked out for me. He was walking home from school when someone drove by in a car and shot him.”

In 2016, firearm injuries were the third leading cause of death for children between the ages of one and seventeen in the United States. An average of four children per day died from a gun injury.[1] Eighteen percent of children in the United States—over 13 million—were living in poverty.[2] More than 92,000 children were removed from their home because a parent had a drug-abuse issue,[3] and over 437,000 were in foster care.[4] The circumstances that gave rise to these grim statistics have not changed substantially since that time.

Jesus’s innocent death on the cross was a balm for Angelique as he hung with and for her brother. She turned to the cross of Christ in her unfathomable loss, where her Savior was united with her brother in his death.

*Children are at home in the spiritual realm; it is their nature to believe in what they cannot see.*

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus’s disciples jockeyed for position and attempted to impose a hierarchy of greatness on the community of his followers. When they came to him with the question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1–5), Jesus answered them by calling a child at play to come from the sidelines. He placed the child in the midst of them. Jesus didn’t elevate the child onto a stage, or seat one at his right and another at his left; there were no thrones, no crowns, no spiritual medals, no better or best. He placed a child among them and said: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.” Children have no standing, no position, no authority, no money. They are dependent upon others for their food, clothes, and safety—for their very survival. Jesus parted the crowd of adults to make room for children in order to demonstrate what greatness is. “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said, “unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4).

Children are at home in the spiritual realm; it is their nature to believe in what they cannot see. Their vivid, often wild imaginations are not distanced from their innate spirituality by knowledge and reason. Innate spirituality is a perceptual and intellectual faculty that allows us to feel part of something larger than ourselves. It lets us experience an interactive relationship with a guiding, ultimately loving presence that is with us from birth. Spirituality both precedes and transcends language, culture, and religion. It is as natural to a child as is their fascination with a butterfly or a boat. According to Lisa Miller in her research on the spirituality of children, *The Spiritual Child; The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving,* “The confluence of evidence is clear . . . biologically, we are hardwired for a spiritual connection. Spiritual development is a biological and psychological imperative from birth . . . the innate spiritual attunement of young children—unlike other lines of development—appears to begin whole and fully expressed.”[5]
As we mature in faith, our knowledge of God and of our tradition increases, but often at the expense of the imaginative, connected spiritual life that we had the capacity for as children. Our prayer life is often divorced from our daily life and surroundings. Adults lose the honesty and humor that children bring to prayer. It frequently becomes an extraneous exercise, often a duty. Children, on the other hand, are blessed in prayer by their fearless neediness. Children pray what they feel, not what they think. Their spontaneous manner becomes a blessing in the spiritual realm, in the kingdom of heaven. This is what leads Jesus to place them in the midst of adults and draw attention to their patterns of life.

The silence taught us to listen to ourselves, to hear what we wanted to bring to God in prayer.

At Sunday liturgy, when I was not in the pulpit, children joined me in the center aisle, and we walked out of the sanctuary during the singing of the sermon hymn. In an adjacent room with many windows and abundant light, we sat on a huge carpet spread on the shiny pine floor. We sat together in silence for one minute (using a kitchen timer and waiting for the *ding* before speaking). The silence taught us to listen to ourselves, to hear what we wanted to bring to God in prayer. Older children passed out colored markers and small pieces of paper. Children who could write wrote their prayers and embellished them with drawings. The only noise in a group of twenty or so children, was someone asking for a particular color of marker to be passed, or the sound of crumpling paper as a child reached for a fresh page to begin again.

Whenever I am discouraged—when my work strays far from the passion for God that drew me into spiritual leadership—I reach into the large shiny bag filled with the prayers of children, prayers that I saved from Sunday to Sunday. The children’s honesty and humor bring me back. They help me to pray.

*Dear God, I kicked the ball in the wrong goal and all my friends are mad at me. Can you help me?*
*Dear God, My best friend’s Mom had to go to a hospital kind of place for awhile, please take care of my friend while her Mom gets better.*
*Dear God, My Grampa is sort of mean, will you please make him nicer?*
*Dear God, My teacher’s cat is sick, please make it better.*
*Dear God, Dad was sad last night, and I am worried about him. Please make him happy again.*
*Dear God, My Grama’s dog got lost, please find her, she is Grama’s best friend.*
*Dear God, Please let me remember everything when it is time to take the test.*

Often their prayers are simple questions:

*Dear God, In Sunday School they told us what you do. Who does it when you are on vacation?*
*Dear God, I read the bible. What does begat mean? Nobody will tell me.*
*Dear God, Are you really invisible or is that just a trick?*
*Dear God, Do animals use you or is there someone else for them?*
*Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.*
*Dear God, Please put a holiday between Christmas and Easter, there is nothing good in there now.*
*Dear God, Please send me a pony, I never asked for anything else. You can look it up.*
*Dear God, Please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year.*
Dear God, If you watch in church on Sunday I will show you my new shoes.
Dear God, I love you because you give us what we need to live, but I wish you would tell me why you made it so we have to die.[6]

Children pray their life.

How many times have we kept ourselves from praying for what we really want because we have an idea that . . . what? That God doesn’t care if we find the love we long for or the job we dream of? When kids want their team to win, or to pass a test, or find a new friend, they do not hesitate to ask God for these things. If they are worried about how hard their mom works or see their dad crying, they pray for them.

Who wants to keep praying when we are not praying about what we truly care about? Who wants a prayer life that judges our prayers as unworthy, or wrong? Who wants to pray when you think you will never get it right, never do it enough, and never be good at it? These barriers don’t block the blessed hearts of children at prayer. Children pray their life.

I wonder if Jesus called them close to him because their humor and humility brought him back to himself—perhaps in the same way that going off to the mountains, or getting in a boat and rowing out on the water did.

Try seeking out children when you have lost your way at prayer. Part your way through a group of adults and talk with a child. Ask them what they think God is like and whether they ever talk to God. Lacking the delusion of self-importance, children are blessed in their connection to God, because of what they do not yet possess. That poverty of spirit blesses their prayer lives, and it blesses ours.

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[4]. Ibid.


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Lessons from the Music of the Global South

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God—Luke 6:20

According to the report by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Africa is now the vanguard of World Christianity. There are currently 599 million Christians in Africa compared to 597 million in Latin America and 550 million in Europe.[1] The report projects that by the year 2050 the number of Christians in the global south (Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania) will surpass those in Europe and North America. In another report, the World Bank highlighted the fact that the majority of the world’s extreme poor live in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The report noted that although “over 1 in 10 people live in extreme poverty globally, in Sub-Saharan Africa, that figure is 4 in 10, representing 389 million people—that’s more poor people than all other regions combined.”[2] Through these two sets of data, it seems Jesus’s proclamation in Luke 6:20, “blessed are the poor,” has a bearing on the life of the church beyond one’s individual faith practice. Concern for the poor was well articulated in the previous issue of this Review, in which Don Saliers and Adam Tice provided us with thoughtful reflections and musical examples of standing in solidarity with the poor.[3] I would like to augment these reflections with musical examples that come from the global south, and consider their meaning and importance for the entire church.

An important gift that African Christianity has shared with the world is its embodied worship experience.

It is a challenging undertaking to understand music from the global south within its proper context. Too often, the church situated in the global north has defined what “global music” is and embraced such artifacts without being aware of the issue of stereotyping non-Western congregational songs.[4] To address this, I would like for us to experience music-making that arises from the global south and appreciate their songs of faith within their socio-cultural context. The task is to learn from the poor and to experience the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims is theirs.

From the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria, we have the “African Credo—I Believe,” composed by Jude Chicka Nnam.[5] Though this work is in English, the African musical devices of “call and response” and the incipit ostinato “Do you believe” are unmistakably present throughout the song. Their presence dramatically transforms a lengthy liturgical text into one that is both readily singable and conducive to body movement that serves as a mnemonic device for holistic learning.

Far more significant, however, is the metanarrative of the song—one that calls for a personal response: taking a stand and staking one’s life on belief. The notion of personal faith commitment is ubiquitous
throughout the global south. Indeed, the price of faith is costly in many instances, with persecution and martyrdom increasingly common.

In recent months in the United States, the ethical value system foundational to Christianity has been severely challenged in the public square (by separation of families, lack of truth-telling, growth in racism, etc.), yet the church has failed to stand together in response. Instead it has splintered, with some resisting but others keeping silent or condoning such acts. Might this be the time for the church at home to return to its existential purpose? Here, the lesson we can learn from the poor is that we must demonstrate unconditional love of God and neighbor.

An important gift that African Christianity has shared with the world is its embodied worship experience. While churches in the global north experience celebrations of the Eucharist that might be overly somber, our African sisters and brothers live out the joyful dimension the Eucharist wholeheartedly. “Yamba Yamba Yamba Yahweh” is a song in the Kikongo language from the Congo region. Despite the fact that material poverty is common in the land, this short song revels in the salvific work of Christ: Take, take, take with God / Take the bread with our Lord / Take the wine with our Lord / Receive our incense oh Lord.[6]

Its call and response and closed harmony singing are idiomatic of African church music. The brief text hints at one’s dependency on God. Indeed, such dependency has life-or-death implications in their social context, a situation far different from the challenges faced by those of us who are better situated in the global north. Does “give us our daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer take on a physical life-or-death meaning for us? It certainly does for those facing extreme poverty. How desperate for God are we? The very question can help us learn a lesson from the poor.

At the other end of the Christian worship-music spectrum, contemporary worship songs are also flourishing in the global south. Here, we have the song Kulungile Baba (It is well, Father) by South African gospel singer, Sfiso Ncwane (1979–2016).[7] In this song, Ncwane affirms the goodness of God, regardless of circumstances. He sings,

\[Kulungile Baba (It is well, Father) / Kulungile somandla (If it’s your will, almighty) / Kulungile Makuyintando yakho Baba (If it’s within your will, Father) / Kulungile Konkw’okwenzekayo Baba (Everything that is happening, Father) / Kulungile Baba (It is well, Father).\[8]

In the brief profile of Ncwane, we learn of his difficult childhood; yet through it all, we read how God blessed him.[9] The Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Romans declared:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35–39).

It is this sense of assured destiny and purposeful living that enables the poor to withstand hardship, distress, persecution, peril, and even martyrdom. Perhaps it is this bold sense of hope and trust in God’s strong love that enables the poor to make heart-wrenching decisions. This sense of conviction is a suitable lesson for us to learn from the poor, who are often without options except to step out in trust and hope for God’s deliverance. May we also learn to sing Kulungile Baba (It is well, Father).

Research into behavioral psychology has investigated how poverty in various forms influences the mindset and health of people. It makes a difference. I wondered if Jesus was thinking of this when he proclaimed, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Might the poor perceive the kingdom of God differently? I have offered three musical examples from the African continent and suggested what we could learn from the poor as they sing in their socio-cultural settings. Without romanticizing poverty, it is possible to discern in such musical expression the people’s willingness to assert their stance of faith, the immediacy of their desire to encounter God, and the unconditional trust that they have for God’s goodness, regardless of their real burdens and struggles. Perhaps these embody lessons that the church in the global north can learn in order to remain effective witnesses in the new reality of our own socio-cultural landscape, where the institutional church is increasingly marginalized by lack of credibility, and where its relevance fades as society turns away from organized religion. Indeed, for the poor, the kingdom of God is not located in an earth-bound religious institution, but is found in the realm of personal faith in a powerful God that acts. Might this be what we need to rediscover?

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The Christian Funeral and the Blessedness of Mourning

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

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

In the middle of a field near my home in rural Maryland there is an old family cemetery. Perhaps two dozen gravestones are huddled together there, the last one dated in the 1920s and the earliest a century before. Once an old farmhouse stood nearby but it is gone now. The farmer who leases this land carefully harrows around the graves, allowing his corn and soybean crops to embrace but not overrun these final resting places.

Generations ago this was a family farm, and whenever the shadow of death fell across this family—a man at the plow felled by a heart attack in the field, perhaps, or a woman claimed in a painful childbirth—the remaining members of the family would carry the body in their arms and place the deceased on the dining table. While the menfolk found a good spot in the cemetery among those who had gone before and dug a fresh grave, the women would tenderly wash and dress the corpse and place it on a bed or a cooling board. As word spread, neighbors would arrive with food and expressions of sorrow. In due course—a day, maybe two or three at most—the body would be placed in a newly made coffin and the lid fastened. The coffin would be lifted up and, as family and neighbors followed, carried across the field to the open grave. Prayers would be offered and words would be said—sometimes there was a member of the clergy present, sometimes not. Then the coffin would be lowered on ropes into the grave, the sod shoveled over it, and the bereaved would trudge home to continue the rhythms of their days.

Increasingly survivors decide to hold no public service at all, choosing privacy for whatever rituals of grief they may observe.
Life is different now, of course. Family cemeteries are largely abandoned, curiosities in suburban subdivisions or shopping center parking lots, inconveniences for tractors and cultivators in fields. When there is a death, nobody goes into the pasture to dig a grave or places a body on the table to be washed and groomed. A commercial funeral home is summoned to take the body, which will most likely be cremated (slightly more than half of Americans are now cremated, and the rates are rising steadily). Usually there is still some kind of service, but now it is most often a “memorial service” without the corpse or, more euphemistically, a “celebration of life,” held after the disposition of the body. Increasingly survivors decide to hold no public service at all, choosing privacy for whatever rituals of grief they may observe. Cemeteries, even large public ones, are becoming relics of an earlier time. In his book Is the Cemetery Dead? David Charles Sloane chronicles the move of today’s younger generations away from institutional, culturally sanctioned, and stable rituals of death and toward more personal, informal, and fluid death practices, as represented by a rejection of cemeteries as memorials to the dead. “Will the millennial generation continue to embrace the cemetery,” he asks, “when they can celebrate an untimely death more immediately and informally? Or when they can publish a memorial web page accessible across the world rather than visit an often-inconvenient gravesite?”[1]

Human beings have always sensed that this movement to the grave or the fire is a sacred arc and the carrying of the dead body a sacred task.

Whatever social and psychological gains may be there in the newer, informal death practices, there are losses as well. First, current practices often neglect the sheer fact of the dead body, and there is wisdom to be found in the human necessity of taking the body to the place of final disposition. Whenever someone dies among the living, it is necessary to move the body, and fairly quickly, from the place of death to the grave, the fire, the sea or whatever will be the final resting place. In fact, historically this moving of the corpse from here to there is not something done after the funeral or before the memorial service; it is the funeral. The question is not really whether there will be a funeral. All dead bodies are taken to the place of disposition, and, thus, there is a funeral for each death. The question is, who if anyone will attend and what if anything will be said and sung and done as the body is transported?

Second, current practices often wash away the sanctity of the sheer act of performing a funeral. No human society has ever done the moving of a dead body from place of death to place of disposition in a perfunctory way, as if they were disposing of the trash. Human beings have always sensed that this movement to the grave or the fire is a sacred arc and the carrying of the dead body a sacred task. As they walk with the deceased to the place of disposition, stories are told, songs are sung, prayers are said. Carrying the deceased along the way is a moment both human and holy. As the fourth-century Christian document, The Apostolic Constitutions, counsels, “In the funerals of the departed, accompany them with singing. . . for precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”[2]
Christian funerals, therefore, have always had a dual meaning. At one level, they bear honest witness to the continuing power of death, the final enemy, in human experience. As such, they are occasions for grief and sorrow. At another level, however, they testify to the power of Christ’s Resurrection and are occasions for confident joy. The Christian funeral itself, as a dramatic act, symbolizes the completion of baptism for the one who has died. At the beginning of the Christian life, this person was washed and anointed in baptism, and, now at the end, the body is washed and anointed at death. The deceased was fed at Christ’s table throughout life, and in the earliest Christian funeral practice, a eucharist was held at the grave. In the living of the Christian life, we bear one another’s burdens, and now at the end we bear the burden of the body of the one who has died. At one level, death has done its worst, and a life has come to an end. At another level, however, the Good Shepherd has carried a lamb home and life has come to its fullness.

This double intentionality of the funeral points to an important distinction that can be made between grief and mourning. Grief is the sense of loss, the season of weeping and sorrow, that death prompts. Except in the case of morbid grief, it lasts for a while, then lessens. Mourning, however, is more than a psychological state that comes and goes. Mourning is a theological posture that endures and is full of blessing, as expressed in Jesus’s second beatitude: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4).

At one level, death has done its worst, and a life has come to an end. At another level, however, the Good Shepherd has carried a lamb home and life has come to its fullness.

As many have noted, the Beatitudes tend to fall into two clusters. Some describe ways of being that are in themselves blessed in the present moment, such as being meek, merciful, or pure in heart. Others, however, such as hungering and thirsting for righteousness and mourning, ground their blessing in the hope of a great reversal, that in the providence of God the conditions that provoke them will be overcome. As New Testament scholar John Meier has said,

Clearly, the beatitudes of Jesus are eschatological to the core. Human happiness is no longer defined by a wisdom limited to a human future. The mourners, the meek, the merciful are declared happy now... because they are certain that they will find consolation, inheritance, and mercy on the last day, when God sets things right. The future triumph of God, not the present misery of humanity, determines what true happiness is, however covert its operation in this present age.[31]

In the face of death, then, mourning is a protest against the power of death, a recognition that death is a violation of God’s will for life, and a hope for the reversal the Resurrection brings. Mourning is blessed, then, not because of death and loss but because of the great reversal, God’s promise to swallow up death in victory. The sound of grief is human weeping. The sound of mourning is the whole creation “groaning in labor pains” (Romans 8:22) and the faithful shouting defiantly, “Where, O death, is your victory?” (1 Cor. 15:55).
Sometime in the late nineteenth century, Christianity in the West began to lose its eschatological nerve. Funerals became less and less about carrying the dead to God and more about encouraging the bereaved to get past a difficult moment. Instead of being baptismal processions carrying the saints to glory, funerals focused on grief management, and, for the first time in human history the dead became unwelcome at their own obsequies. The sound of mourning “eagerly longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19), gave way to the murmurs of therapy and finally to the giddiness of superficial “celebrations of life.”

When Christian funerals are performed well, we both grieve and mourn. We carry a loved one to the grave, and thus we grieve. But we do not “grieve as others who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). We know that we are carrying that loved one beyond the grave to the embrace of God, and therefore we mourn the outrage of death and lean toward the comfort that will surely come. As Gregory of Nyssa said in a homily on this beatitude, “Comfort comes from partaking of the Comforter.”[4] This is why, in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, the opposite of mourning is not mere psychological stability or lack of grief but laughter (Luke 6:21b, 25b). Laughter is provoked by the surprise of joy, the astonishment of resurrection, the sudden appearance of God’s reign. As theologian Jürgen Moltmann put it, “With Easter the laughter of the redeemed, the dance of the liberated and the creative play of fantasy begins.”[5]

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Places to Mourn for Those Who Have Lost Their Place

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

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

On a recent visit to the city of Mainz, Germany, I came across two intriguing places of mourning, right in the center of the city. The two sites could not have been more different, yet both spoke clearly to the vital importance of “place” in the hard labor of grieving.

*What about mourning those who have lost their place?*

I was visiting Mainz, first and foremost, to grieve and honor a former bishop of Mainz, Karl Cardinal Lehmann. Lehmann, who had become bishop while I studied theology in Mainz in the early 1980s, had died just a couple of months earlier. His death was widely mourned, not only by the people of his diocese, but also by ecumenical leaders from both East and West with whom he had collaborated, and by leading politicians in Germany for whom he had been a knowledgeable and trusted conversation partner. On the day of his burial, Cardinal Lehmann’s casket was carried in solemn procession through the city center to the cathedral. The Mass of Christian Burial was live-streamed. The final resting place of the bishop—the eighty-seventh successor to St. Boniface as Bishop of Mainz—was in the crypt of the historic cathedral. This place has continued to be one of active, heartfelt mourning. People visit the cathedral just to descend to the crypt, to pray, and to remember. Most recently, the President of Germany paid his respects there. The visitors leave fresh flowers, candles, and scribbled notes of gratitude. Clearly, the mourning for this beloved cardinal is not only deep but also takes place at a truly resonant site: in the historic cathedral, below the high altar at which Karl Cardinal Lehmann presided as Bishop of Mainz for over 33 years. He is buried in his place.
But what about the labor of mourning when there is no such place? What about mourning those who have lost their place? In walking distance from the cathedral in Mainz is a newly established place of mourning that seeks to respond to those questions. The site was dedicated just a few months ago, as a “Trauerort”—a public place for mourning. It was conceived as an invitation, especially to the many recent migrants and refugees who have been received by Germany over the last few years. Often, these migrants and refugees have not only lost their homes and homelands but also the graves of their beloved dead. Even sadder, some of those who have made their way to Europe have lost loved ones in their very flight from places of violence and conflict. Think only of those lost at sea, on perilous boat journeys across the Mediterranean. How and where to mourn—visibly, noticeably, publicly—when there is no cemetery that houses your beloved dead, and no public memorial to those you left behind?

Surely it is no coincidence that in recent years, online places of mourning, including virtual cemeteries, have risen sharply in number and internet traffic.

This is where the idea of a Trauerort comes in. Mainz is not the only or first city in Germany that now includes such a place for mourning. The city of Düsseldorf opened a first “intercultural place of mourning” in 2011. In Mainz, the Trauerort is located on the side of a Baroque Catholic church. The parish collaborated in the creation of this public space and offered a part of its own grounds for this Trauerort. It is a quiet spot, in the midst of a busy city. A tree offers shade, and two stone half-circles, which can serve as a bench and/or candle stand, face each other, like two arms that hold something precious in their midst. The design is by the artist Doaa Elasyed, herself a refugee who now lives in Germany. The Trauerort is made complete by a huge, rough, unpolished stone. The text on the stone reads as follows, in loose translation:

A Place to Mourn:

For all those who cannot visit the graves of their beloved dead.
For all who have moved here from far away, for refugees and migrants.

For all peoples, of all religions, cultures, and languages.

I am not a refugee, although I sometimes experience myself as a migrant between my country of origin and the other side of the North Atlantic. Yet the sadness of no longer (or very rarely) being able to visit the graves of my beloved dead resonates with me. And given that migration continues to be on the rise globally, I wonder whether places like the Trauerorte in Germany are not important to cultivate in other contexts too. How, for example, do Central and Latin Americans who have moved to North America experience their loss of a public place to mourn their beloved dead?

Surely it is no coincidence that in recent years, online places of mourning, including virtual cemeteries, have risen sharply in number and internet traffic. People need a place to mourn, and to do so visibly, making others witnesses to this mourning. Our churches have long offered such spaces to mourn the dead. Maybe our churches can now enlarge both the spaces for mourning and the circle of mourners, to include today’s global migrants.

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The Meek Will Inherit the Earth

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

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

The little girl looked up at me and smiled. She was kneeling as she looked up at me with a slight smile. It was more question than statement. She asked, “Can we pray for Mimi?” I replied yes, and asked, “Who’s Mimi?”

She laughed in the way that only a four year old can laugh, as though I was silly because I didn’t remember; I had met Mimi just a few weeks earlier. Mimi was her family’s pet dog.

Her faith and “disposition of spirit” showed a willingness to trust—something that any adult might learn from.

As a part of the worship service every week, we invite people to the altar for prayer. It isn’t uncommon for children to come to the altar for prayer. However, it is rare for those who come to be this young, and even more so for someone to request prayer for a pet.

We joined hands and prayed for Mimi.

Part my prayer was that Mimi would continue to bring the family joy. When we finished the prayer, the little girl looked up at me and said, “Mimi died.” She was four and seeking answers. Without stating it, her question was, “Mimi is dead. How can she still bring us joy here on earth?”

We spoke in hushed tones. I said, “Because Mimi isn’t still here doesn’t mean that she doesn’t still bring joy. You had a lot of good times with her, didn’t you?” She nodded her head as she affirmed the statement. “Whenever you start to get sad, you can think about Mimi, and all the love and joy you shared with her and that she gave you and your mom, dad, and brother.”

The frowning look of determination that she had arrived at the altar with was replaced with a smile as she marched back down the aisle toward her seat.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” The little girl who came to ask for prayers for her dog was in her own way living this beatitude. Her faith and “disposition of spirit” showed a willingness to trust—something that any adult might learn from. Her meekness was not a sign of passivity but of receptivity.

The New Testament Greek lexicon defines Praus, the Greek word that is translated meek in English, as “the disposition of the spirit when we accept God’s dealings toward us without disputing or resisting.”
Colloquially, the word “meek” has been understood as a description of someone who is mild or passive in general; one who stands in the background. But this is a very inadequate way of understanding what meekness means in the Bible. The Old Testament uses the word meek not to describe a personality trait of passivity but to signify those who are poor and afflicted. Psalm 37:11 promises the reversal of their fortunes: “The meek shall inherit the land, and delight in abundant prosperity.” Here, the Hebrew word translated as meek is *anav*. It has historically meant, “poor, humble . . .” but also “someone who acknowledges their need.”[2]

Nature exhibits meekness in a way that humans rarely do. Plants turn toward the sun, and are dependent on the rain. Domesticated animals continually adapt, showing love for their owners, even when the owners have been unloving toward them.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the Beatitudes echo the words of Psalm 37, promising a rich inheritance to those who are poor and afflicted: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 4:5, NRSV). So, what does “Blessed are the meek” actually mean? In light of the biblical background, I have chosen to define it as having faith that God will address the injustices of the world through divine power combined with the “disposition of the spirit when we accept God’s dealings toward us without resisting.”

How can those of us who are no longer children embrace, cultivate, and live the blessing of this kind of meekness? Perhaps we can take a lesson from the natural world.

Nature exhibits meekness in a way that humans rarely do. Plants turn toward the sun, and are dependent on the rain. Domesticated animals continually adapt, showing love for their owners, even when the owners have been unloving toward them. Dogs are one of the best examples of what it is to be meek. The dog, partially because it thinks the owner is never going to return when he or she leaves, showers the owner with love, and is often ready to respond to its owner with love. Wild animals are equally, if not more adaptable, than those animals that are domesticated. The continued sprawl of our cities causes animals to seek shelter outside of their natural habitats. Yet they continually adapt and acquiesce. Yes, there are the stories of animals that respond by attack, but this is rare considering the manner in which the natural habitat of animals has been continually encroached upon by humans.

By studying the natural world and becoming aware of our place in it, we also become aware of the many ecosystems we are part of on a daily basis. In *Worldly Wonder*, Mary Evelyn Tucker writes,

*The grounding of our human aspirations within the creativity of Earth processes and within the limits of the ecosystems may give some appropriate measure to the expansive tendencies of the enlightenment mentality. As we recognize more fully that humans are a subsystem of the Earth we may have the basis for establishing equitable and sustainable economic, social, and political systems.*[3]

When we view our homes, communities and neighborhoods as mini-ecosystems, we are able to begin establishing more equitable systems. These equitable systems are not possible however without a serious contemplation of what it means to live in a way that affirms the life of all of those living and
breathing creatures with which we inhabit the world. The meek do not seek to dominate creation, but to live equitably within it.

Whether we view our role as partners in creation, or as caretakers of creation, we have a responsibility to be good stewards of all that is entrusted to us, in “righteousness, fairness, and justice.”[4] This commitment raises practical questions whose answers will vary depending on the congregation. For example, is it appropriate to incorporate pets and other animals into worship, and if so how? If we regard plants as living, breathing entities, does this change how we worship, and should it? What practices can we use to help deepen our understandings of creation and our role of caring for it?

I’ve learned from my pastoral experiences that exploration in worship—through services that welcome all living entities, and by embracing the questions of children and adults alike—can be a starting point for deepening our understandings of creation and our role in caring for it.

A couple of instances can serve as illustrations. For example, one of the best ways that I have found to incorporate pets and animals into worship is through services where animals are blessed. Although these types of services have been staples in some rural communities for decades, they are showing up more and more in other types of church settings.

The services have been transformative. One participant talked about having never before thought about animals being deserving of the love of God. Another woman who brought one of her dogs for prayer said that after the prayer the dog that had been in poor health was healed. A woman in her late eighties talked about how much she appreciated the chance to pet the animals. Though I can’t say what specific impacts this had on her, aside from an improvement in her mood after every service, pet therapy has been shown to have a number of benefits, including lowering blood pressure, diminishing physical pain, lifting spirits and lessening depression, and increasing self-confidence.[5]

Another example: as part of the ministries of the United Methodist Church where I currently serve, we grow food for families in the community through what we call the Peace Garden Project. As a part of the project, we have a worship service in which we pray for the garden and bless the seeds that we plant. We also include prayer as a regular part of both the planting and the harvest season, and there are Bible studies and joint learning sessions about the role of faith in food and gardening. This challenges us to think more deeply about our connectedness to the earth and how our spiritual practices can be shaped by the natural world.
We have seen a steady increase in the number of people that come to our harvest days and our joint learning sessions. The learning sessions focus on the interconnectedness of justice issues, and they take an in-depth look at connections between the natural world, food, faith, and spirituality. People who come to our harvest days are surprised that they can take home produce free of charge, and most have had a desire to connect beyond the harvest day. Those who have participated in caring for the space prior to and beyond the harvest days—through planting, weeding, and caring for the garden—have talked about how calming the process is, how much more connected they feel to the earth. Working in the garden has given them the opportunity to connect to the Creator in ways beyond their experience of the traditional worship service. They have come away blessed.

Caring for living things that are not human have caused all of the participants to think more deeply about what it means to be connected with the natural world. These processes have allowed us to begin to embrace and live into meekness in the way of plants and animals.

A little girl asked us for prayer for her dog that day. By this simple action, she gave an example of how we can begin to view all of creation and the natural world as worthy of the love of God. When we embrace the possibility that “the meek” might include the natural world, we are able to begin to envision what it means to be partners and caretakers of creation—blessed with the inheritance of the earth.

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Preaching the Just Word

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Originally given as a talk at the University of Notre Dame in 1979, the following essay was published in Liturgy and Social Justice, ed. Mark Searle, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980, 36–52. It is reprinted with the kind permission of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus.

In May 1979, passions flamed in our nation’s capital. Mass was about to begin in St. Matthew’s Cathedral—a Mass to mark Argentina’s national day. Unexpectedly, the assembled Argentinians—embassy officials, military leaders, and others—were addressed from the sanctuary by a priest-protester. For six years this missionary had ministered to a Buenos Aires shantytown; he told how he had been imprisoned and tortured, how priest friends had simply disappeared. He wanted the congregation to join him in a prayer for reconciliation. But at that moment “the organist drowned him out . . . the microphone went dead . . . the rector of the cathedral . . . told [him] to move on.” [1]

Some damned the homilist for “turning a religious event into a political one.” Another said “priests have no place in politics. He should have given a sermon on another subject, like the love of God.”

The trouble seemed to be over; the forty-or-so demonstrators moved from church to street and the liturgy opened. But the preceding was only a prelude. The homilist, head of the Spanish Secretariat of the archdiocese, appeared in symbolic purple. Instead of the usual eulogy, he quoted statements by John Paul II and the bishops of Latin America about repression, torture, and disappearances, about the attempt of governments to justify such activities on the basis of national security. He began to focus on the people who had vanished under the Videla regime and quoted Scripture on Herod’s slaughter of the innocents.

At that juncture the congregation (three hundred or more) stormed angrily out of the church, led by a high-ranking general. Some damned the homilist for “turning a religious event into a political one.” Another said “priests have no place in politics. He should have given a sermon on another subject, like the love of God.”[2] But the archdiocesan director communications said “he had no objection to the way the sermon was handled. . . . ‘We hope our priests are teaching the truth,’ he said. ‘Whether what they say is offensive and bothers the conscience of some people should not be the issue. The issue should be whether it is the truth.’”[3]
The scene at St. Matthew's provides a stirring context for my address; perhaps it will put teeth into it. You see, the title thrust upon me is deceptive. What could be less threatening, more pacifying, than the sleepy subject “Preaching the Just Word”? In point of fact, as the Argentinian incident demonstrates, there are three “sleepers” here: the first is theological, the second liturgical, the third homiletic. The theological question: Does a Church committed to eternal salvation have anything to do with everyday justice? The liturgical question: If the Church has a role to play in the area of justice, how can this possibly affect the liturgy? The homiletic question: If justice does enter the liturgy of the worshiping community, should the preacher preach it—and if so, how?

I

My first question is theological: Does a Church committed to eternal salvation have anything to do with everyday justice? The question is basic, for unless we address that issue, there is no point in asking the next two questions: How does justice enter the liturgy? How do we preach justice?

To get concrete, should the Church speak out on economic injustice, on the fact that at this moment at least 460 million people are hungry? Should the bishops of Chile have criticized their government in 1974 “for violating human rights, creating a climate of insecurity and terror. . . .”? Should Bishop Donal Lamont have castigated the Rhodesian regime for racial discrimination and repression? Should the Church take a position on the Vietnam war, on California lettuce or Farah slacks, on capital punishment or the Panama Canal, or ERA or federal aid for abortions?

I give these examples simply as examples, not to debate the merits of any of them; for these are complex issues. My question is broader than any example. Does the Church, precisely as a Church, have a mission that includes justice and human rights? Does the Church have a role to play in the social, political, and economic orders?

Many Christians, many Catholics, shout a resounding no. As they see it, the Church, as a Church, has no commission to right human injustice. The Church is a spiritual institution, and its mission is sheerly spiritual: it is a channel that links the human person with God. The Church’s charge is to help us know, love, and serve God in this life and to be happy with Him forever in the next. Oh yes, poverty and politics, injustice and inhumanity, may stand as barriers to God’s grace. If they do, then the Church must struggle against them—but not as a direct facet of its mission, only as obstacles at the outer edge of its vocation. The Church’s commission is to gather a band of true believers who will prepare themselves by faith and hope for the redemptive action by which God establishes His Kingdom at the end of history.

Two recent examples. A letter from Texas takes Msgr. George G. Higgins to task for his views on the Church and social justice. Christ “did not relieve suffering”; he simply forgave sins. In consequence, the Church should not be concerned about violations of social justice. Like Christ, it should concentrate on showing us that “it is the hardness of men’s hearts that causes our suffering” and that “as long as the angel of darkness roams the world in search of souls and men fail to reject sin, human misery will continue to exist.”

Similarly, in a recent study titled Christianity and the World Order, Anglican author Edward Norman of Cambridge University argues that the essential thing religion should provide is a “sense of the ultimate worthlessness of human expectations of a better life on earth.” For Norman, “the teachings of the Savior clearly describe a personal rather than a social morality.” By nature, Christianity is exclusively concerned with “the relationship of the soul to eternity.”
Against such a privatized, me-and-Jesus religion the best of Catholic tradition cries out clearly, at times in anger. Papal encyclicals, from Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum* (on the rights and obligations of workers, employers, and the state) to John Paul II’s address at Puebla and his first encyclical (*Redemptor hominis*), give the lie to such a thesis.

*No, the Eucharistic signs and symbols do not of themselves change social, political, and economic structures; but they should change 700 million hearts and minds, grace them to admit the oppressions of which they are victims and for which they are responsible, inspire them to work with others for the coming of a kingdom characterized by justice and love.*

Oh indeed, the Christian has to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, salvation is not sheer socialization, personality development, liberation from oppressive structures, an end to poverty; it is a divinization. The Church’s primary task is to see to it that the human person is refashioned in the image of Christ; short of this there is no salvation. God fulfills us by uniting us with himself. The essential liberation is freedom from the slavery that is sin. As Pius XII said in a 1956 allocution: “The goal which Christ assigns to [the Church] is strictly religious. . . . The Church must lead men and women to God, in order that they may give themselves over to him unreservedly. . . .”[7]

On the other hand, any program of evangelization is inadequate if the Church doesn’t spend itself to free the human person from every inhuman shackle. Oh yes, the Church has good news to preach even to those whose situation is humanly hopeless; for the good news is Jesus—Jesus alive, yearning to make those who are heavy-burdened one with him. Sanctity is possible in poverty-ridden Appalachia, in the political prisons of the Philippines, in the excrement of Calcutta. But this does not exempt the people of God from the ceaseless struggle to transform the city of man into the Kingdom of God—a Kingdom of peace, of justice, of love.

This is the vision that emerged from the Second Vatican Council—resoundingly in its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity:

*Christ’s redemptive work, while of its nature directed to the salvation of men and women, involves also the renewal of the whole temporal order. The Church has for mission, therefore, not only to bring to men and women the message of Christ and his grace, but also to saturate and perfect the temporal sphere with the spirit of the gospel. . . . The two spheres [spiritual and temporal], distinct though they are, are so linked in the single plan of God that he himself purposes in Christ to take up the whole world again into a new creation, initially here on earth, completely on the last day.[8]*

This is the vision of the 1971 Synod of Bishops in its message “On Justice in the World”: the vindication of justice and participation in the process of transforming the world is “a constitutive element of the preaching of the gospel.” [9] This is the vision that emerged from the 1974 Synod of Bishops in a significant statement on “Human Rights and Reconciliation.” Said the bishops in common:

*Human dignity is rooted in the image and reflection of God in each of us. It is this which*
makes all persons essentially equal. The integral development of persons makes more clear the divine image in them. In our time the Church has grown more deeply aware of this truth; hence she believes firmly that the promotion of human rights is required by the gospel and is central to her ministry.[10]

And in 1976 the International Theological Commission (an advisory body serving the Pope), in a very carefully articulated examination of “Human Development and Christian Salvation,” argued that God’s grace should sharpen the conscience of Christians, should help us build a more just world, not simply by spiritual reformation, not simply by assisting individuals:

. . . for there is a kind of “injustice that assumes institutional shape,” and as long as this obtains, the situation itself calls for a greater degree of justice and demands reforming. Our contemporaries are no longer convinced that social structures have been predetermined by nature and therefore are “willed by God,” or that they have their origin in anonymous evolutionary laws. Consequently, the Christian must ceaselessly point out that the institutions of society originate also in the conscience of society, and that men and women have moral responsibility for these institutions.

We may argue how legitimate it is to speak of “institutional sin” or of “sinful structures,” since the Bible speaks of sin in the first instance terms of an explicit, personal decision that stems from human freedom. But is unquestionable that by the power of sin injury and injustice can penetrate social and political institutions. That is why . . . even situations and structures that are unjust have to be reformed.

Here we have a new consciousness, for in the past these responsibilities could not be perceived as distinctly as they are now. . . . [11]

The last sentence is highly important. We Christians “have a new consciousness. . . .” Not that the Old Testament and the New are silent on social issues. Those who read in Scripture a sheerly personal morality have not sung the psalms or been burned by the prophets, have not perceived the implications of Jesus’ message.[12] And still it remains true that the Church has grown in its awareness of what Jeremiah’s “execute justice” (Jer 7:5) and the gospel of love demand. It is in line with this growth that John Paul II confirmed contemporary magisterial teaching in telling the Third General Assembly of the Latin American Bishops in Puebla: “The Church has learned [in the pages of the gospel] that its evangelizing mission has as an indispensable part (como parte indispensable) action for justice and those efforts which the development of the human person demands. . . .”[13]

II

So far, so good: the struggle for justice is an indispensable facet of the Church’s mission. But the theological question leads to the liturgical question: Granted that the Church has a vital role to play in the area of justice, how can this possibly affect the liturgy?

On principle, it should. As sacramentum fidei, sacrament of Christian belief, liturgy has a twin function: exprimit and causat. Liturgy should give expression to the faith-experience of the Christian people, and liturgy should mold that experience.[14] All “liturgies” express experience and mold it: country music in Nashville, professional and college football, marching bands and the New York City Ballet, the Nazi goose step and the Aztec Two Step. . . . This is what expresses and evokes the joys and frustrations of a
people, their anger and violence, their loves and their hates, their pent-up emotions. If we accept the
thesis of first-rate liturgiologists that Christian liturgy sacramentalizes what goes on in the rest of our
lives, that the liturgical journey ritualizes the human journey, two questions challenge us: (1) In point of
fact, does this liturgy express the faith-experience of this people? (2) If it does, how Catholic is that
expression? The dimensions of this problem, its dangers, were brought home to me in an article by
Brian Wickler.

[The liturgical] revival [among organized Christians] had a good side—in that it stimulated
mature and scholarly thought about the fundamentals of Christianity and an understanding
of the depths to which secularization had gone. But it had a bad side too—the side that
made it possible in some places for the Christian liturgy inside the church and the fascist
liturgy outside the church to coexist, or even at times to cooperate with each other. The
liturgical revival was, in its origins, a conservative or even reactionary movement, liable at
times to delusions of grandeur. This gave it a certain sympathy for the trappings of fascism
and made the essential atheism of the latter hard to nail down. It is perhaps not surprising
that those Christians most opposed to Hitler were often those least touched by new
liturgical ideas—either intellectual protestants like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or simple
tridentine-formed peasant-Catholics like Franz Jägerstätter. Neither is it surprising that
many post-fascist secular theologies of Europe and America (including those developed
under Catholic auspices) have today turned away from liturgy as a source of inspiration or
hope, or have even give it up as a bad job altogether.[15]

Does it frighten you that the liturgy in a Catholic cathedral is expected to coexist with, perhaps even
cooperate with, the fascist liturgy that is Argentinian repression? Does it bother you that in liturgizing,
ritualizing, sacramentalizing a nation’s experience, we are expected to limit our symbols to the love of
God?

In his challenging book *The Eucharist and Human Liberation,[16]* Tissa Balasuriya insists that since
Eucharistic worship is at the center of Christian life, the Eucharist must affirm and promote the biblical
imperative of human liberation. But, he finds, almost without exception the Eucharist has been a place
where the oppressor joins the oppressed with impunity; the Eucharist has been used in cooperation
with, and support of, colonizing powers; even today liberating movements do not find affirmation in
Eucharistic worship. Whatever the defects of the book, however utopian its hopes, it compels us to ask a
crucial question: How is it possible to celebrate Eucharist if it is not expressing the real oppressions of
our people, if it is molding a faith that liberates from enslavements?

But precisely here a work of discrimination, of discernment, is imperative. I will assume that Joseph
Gelineau’s thesis is valid:

> My thesis is that the celebration of the risen Christ by the assembly of believers is one of
> the most effective political actions that men can perform in this world—if it is true that this
> celebration, by contesting any power system which oppresses mankind, proclaims, stirs up
> and inaugurates a new order in the world.[17]

Here “politics” is used to describe “that exercise of power which controls public welfare and progress.”[1]
But how does the liturgy influence public welfare and progress? On the face of it, few actions seem less political than liturgy. Totalitarian regimes hostile to the Church “begin by forbidding Christians any form of self-organized action in society; they then prohibit or supervise religious instruction and preaching; but in general they allow worship as inoffensive.”

The issue is highly complex; time forces me to simplify, and to simplify is, in a sense, to falsify.

1. Paradoxically, it is not primarily by introducing political themes, by inserting an ideology, that the liturgy becomes a social force. I am not disparaging the Mass of Protest in Latin America or the Mass for Peace in the Roman Missal; I have been moved by liberating readings from Exodus and the prophets, by “prayers of the faithful” that cry to heaven for bread and justice. I mean rather that there is a serious danger in a “celebration which tries to be political but relies more on an ideology than on the paschal dynamics of the Christian mystery”; it “very soon becomes a politicized liturgy: that is, one used for specific political ends.”

2. And yet, as George Higgins argues, “it is still the Mass which matters most—even in the temporal order.” But the liturgical action effects change above all by its own inner dynamic. Why? Because the temporal order can be changed only by conversion—only if men and women turn from sin and selfishness. And for Catholics the primary source of conversion is the sacrifice of the Mass, which extends through time and space the sacrifice of the Cross through which the world is transfigured. The Mass should be the liberating adventure of the whole Church, the sacrament that frees men and women from their inherited damnable concentration on themselves, looses us from our ice-cold isolation, fashions us into brothers and sisters agonizing not only for a Church of charity but for a world of justice.

No, the Eucharistic signs and symbols do not of themselves change social, political, and economic structures; but they should change 700 million hearts and minds, grace them to admit the oppressions of which they are victims and for which they are responsible, inspire them to work with others for the coming of a kingdom characterized by justice and love.

The problem is not whether there is a link between liturgy and liberation. The problem is that we do not allow the liturgy to liberate—even to liberate us.

III

So much for the theological question, so much for the liturgical question. The struggle for justice is an indispensable facet of the Church’s mission, and the liturgy would express and mold this facet of human experience. Now for the stickiest issue of all, the homiletic question: Should the preacher preach justice—and if so, how?

The more general question—should I preach justice?—ought not detain us, much less paralyze us. The specific function of the homily, Yves Congar has pointed out, is not only to explain the liturgical mystery but to bring the faithful into the mystery “by throwing light on their life so that they can unit it to this mystery. When this happens, the sermon is truly a word which prompts a response.” You see, the liturgy’s insights “are more or less veiled”; liturgical texts and forms tend to be immobilized, with rare exceptions are the same for all, whatever their condition. The homily extends the immemorial symbols to a particular time and place, a particular people. And so I must speak to this people’s
needs, this people’s hungers. If they need to act justly or if they hunger for justice, a liturgy that expresses and molds their faith-experience forbids me to keep silent. To say nothing is to say something.

But what do I say? How concrete dare I get? For some, the priest simply preaches the gospel, the word of God, teaches what Jesus taught. Preach the word of God and parishioners will make the right decision in the moral order. In a word, limit yourself to general principles.

I am afraid it will not wash, for at least two good reasons. First, it betrays a glorious tradition in the Church. It forgets how Ambrose of Milan, ordered by the Empress Justina to surrender a basilica to the Arians, preached a resounding no: “I am commanded,” he declared to Justina’s son, the Emperor Valentinian, “Hand over the basilica’ I reply: ‘It is not right for me to hand it over; nor will it profit you, Emperor, to receive it. You cannot legally violate the home of a private citizen; do you think you can take away the house of God? . . . You may not have it. . . .”[25] It forgets that John Chrysostom, royally hated by the Empress Eudoxia, opened his homily on the feast of John the Baptist by crying: “Again Herodias raves; again she rages; again she dances; again she asks for the head of John upon a charger.”[26] It will not square with John Paul II’s homily in Santo Domingo on January 25, 1979:

> Making this world more just means, among other things, . . . to strive to have a world in which no more children lack sufficient nutrition, education, instruction; . . . that there be no more poor peasants without land . . . no more workers mistreated . . . no more systems which permit the exploitation of man by man or by the state . . . no more who have too much while others are lacking everything through no fault of their own . . . no injustice or inequality in administering justice; . . . that the law support everyone equally; that the force not prevail over truth and rights . . . and that the economic and political never prevail over the human.[27]

At the beginning of his journey to Latin America, John Paul was not mouthing pious abstractions; he was addressing actual life-and-death issues.

Second, homilies that avoid concrete applications risk saying nothing. The Old Testament and the New are indeed our Bible, the privileged source of our faith and our morality. But if I mount the pulpit with “Scripture alone” in my hands, if I limit my preaching to the broad biblical imperatives, if I simply repeat scriptural slogans like “Man does not live on bread alone,” “My peace I give to you,” “Seek first the kingdom of God,” “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” “Wives, be subject to your husbands,” hungry stomachs will stay bloated, the arms race will escalate, dissidents will rot in political prisons, blacks will return to their slavery, and women will continue to be second class citizens in much of the world. After all, it is not only heathen who are responsible for oppression; the oppressors, large and small, often break Eucharistic bread with us. In fact, who among us is not, by act or silence, an oppressor of our brothers and sisters?

> Beyond that, our delicate, indispensable task is to help form Christian consciences—not force them, form them.
No, the gospel much be touched to concrete human living. And remember, the Church grows—the whole Church, pope as well as peasant—in its understanding of what the gospel demands. For example, in its efforts to construct livable, viable, social order, the Church has consistently stressed three facets of human living: truth, justice, and love. Only within recent times have these principles of social order been finally rounded out with a fourth principle indispensable in our days. I mean freedom. It is the growing realization that truth, justice and love are not enough, are not really there, if the man and woman they serve are not free.

It is this that must be preached—our fresh understanding of what the perennial gospel demands or suggests in the context of our time and space. The magisterium does it (see Mater et magistra and Populorum progressio); the institutional Church need not, should not, and does not regard itself, in Karl Rahner’s words, “solely as the doctrinaire guardian and teacher of abstract principles which become increasingly abstract and are liable to carry within themselves the danger of a terrifying sterility. . . .”[28] The Church has and should have the courage for concrete imperatives, concrete directives, “even in regard to socio-political action by Christians in the world.”[29] This same courage the preacher must carry to the pulpit.

But the neuralgic problem remains: How concrete dare I get? There is no simple solution, no all-purpose push button to activate the answer. Each issue calls for blood, sweat, and tears. At times the issue is clear. In 1964 I simply had to endorse the Civil Rights Act; there was no alternative, save the enslavement of a race. But few political and socioeconomic issues are that clear-cut. Once you get beyond the general principles—the right to live and eat and work, the right to education and health care, the right to decent housing—it is difficult to locate the evil, to identify the villain, to pinpoint the solution. I can indeed proclaim from the pulpit today what the United Nations World Food Conference proclaimed from Rome in 1974: “Every man, woman, and child has the inalienable right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition. . . .” But the causes are confoundingly complex. Is nature the villain—“acts of God”? Is it people—the world growing too fast? Is it productivity—lack of agricultural know-how? Is it our international economic order—a whole web of unjust relationships between rich and poor countries?[30] Experts, men and women of good will, disagree.

But disagreement need not strike me dumb. It can only render me mute if I see the pulpit as the podium for eternal verities alone, defined dogma, the ipsissima verba of Jesus. Beyond that, our delicate, indispensable task is to help form Christian consciences—not force them, form them. Help form Christian consciences—this is the crucial phrase, with each word of high significance. I am not an expert on world hunger and defense budgets, but without playing partisan politics I can at least wax as indignant as World Bank President Robert S. McNamara when he denounces an arms race that costs the nations more than 400 billion dollars a year, while over a billion men, women, and children live in inhuman degradation, condemned to stunted bodies, darkened minds, shortened lives.[31] I do not know the political solution; I cannot fashion a budget; but I do know that those horrifying figures add up to a moral evil. Given that moral evil, how can I fail to echo the cry of HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr., at Notre Dame’s commencement: “Of all the judgements of history and God we should fear, it is their judgement on our continued failure to use the means at hand to end the hunger of the world that we should fear most”?[32] This much at the very least God’s people can expect of me: in the midst of my mind’s chaos, a cry from the heart.

But what if I am convinced I do have the answer? The answer to the arms race is unilateral disarmament; to abortion, a constitutional amendment; to the parochial-school crisis, tax credits; to
capital punishment, life imprisonment; to feminine enslavement, the ERA; to migrant-worker injustice, a boycott of grapes and lettuce; to Rhodesia, economic sanctions. These are indeed moral issues, but may I preach my own solution in the name of the gospel? Of all homiletic minefields, this may well be the most perilous. I shall move quickly and warily, aware that each step could trigger an explosion.

1. I do not see how you can bar the controversial from the pulpit simply because it is controversial. After all, I cannot be content with glittering generalities; I must move the gospel to this age, to this people, but the meaning and demands of the gospel today are chock-full of complexity. And the more complex an issue, the more open to controversy.

2. With Peter Henriot and George Higgins, I submit that “the pulpit, as a general rule, is not the proper forum in which to pontificate on complicated and highly controversial political and socio-economic issues.”[33] Here the crucial word is “pontificate.” On such issues, in a short span of time, with no room for counterargument, I dare not speak in dogmatic fashion, as if I alone am the trumpet of the Lord.

3. If I dare not dogmatize, I may still raise the issues, lay them out, even tell people where I stand and why—not impose my convictions as gospel, but to quicken their Christian conscience, to spur them to personal reflection.

4. I may not take unfair advantage of a captive audience, especially since the expertise in the pews often exceeds my own. Inasmuch as the suffering faithful, however sorely provoked, are expected by immemorial custom to hold their tongues as I empty my quiver against the ERA, I should provide another forum—parish hall, smaller discussion groups—where controversial issues may be properly debated, where all who wish to speak their piece may be heard. I must guard against a persistent priestly peril, where I see the ordained minister as alone bearing the burden of Christian guidance and pastoral counseling. No, all of us are in this together; all of us, pope included, belong to an ecclesia discens, a Church that is learning.

5. In line with that realization—we are one body, animated by the same Spirit, and all of us need one another—many a priest must reappraise his attitude toward the people who must listen to him. Some years ago an Irish layman rapped our homiletic knuckles sharply:

   I am afraid that too often our preachers entirely ignore what we, the silent faithful, expect to hear in a sermon. . . . They address us as rebels whom they must subdue; as idlers whom they must shake up; as hardened sinners whom they must needs terrify; as the proud who require to be humiliated; as the self-satisfied who need to be disquieted. . . . [They] are never done telling us of our duties and of our neglect of duty. . . . But if you come to examine it, there is really nothing easier than to put forward a person’s duty; and to hand out reproaches costs nothing either. . . . The thing which is really difficult, which is actually divine, is to give us a taste for our duties, and to awaken in us a wish to do them and to be generous in the doing. And another name for a taste for duty is love. Beloved preachers, then, make us love God, or rather, help us to believe in his love for us.[34]

Those striking words troubled me from the moment I discovered them, especially the last several sentences: the divine thing “is to give us a taste for our duties. . . . help us to believe in [God’s] love for us.” Unexpectedly, that entreaty brought me back from the homily proper to the broader liturgy, from the homilist homilizing to the celebrant celebrating. For in this context of the just word, a Jesuit colleague at the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, John C. Haughey, recaptured for me a remarkable insight expressed by government people engaged in a Woodstock project on government
decision-making. As they saw it, good liturgy facilitates public responsibility not because it provides principles of solution, not because it tells the people what precisely to think about specific conflicts, but rather because a celebrant who effectively celebrates the transcendent puts them in touch with that which transcends all their burning concerns, their particular perplexities. Good liturgy frees them to sort out the issues that they have to decide, because it makes them aware of their addictions and their illusions, casts a pitiless light on the myopic self-interest, detaches from a narrow selfishness, facilitates Christian discernment. In that sense liturgy is not so much didactic as evocative. Let God transpire; let God speak.

Can they feel that I get angry, that I cry, that I beat my fists against a wall in frustration, that I shout out to God against his own seeming injustice? Or do they feel that in my case “the just word” is just a word and nothing more?

A distressing question has taken hold of me and will not leave me: Is it possible that in my understandable yearning to link liturgizing to justice and human rights, I have been saying too much and celebrating too little?

A final word. It has to do with a principle I stressed some years ago at the Notre Dame Pastoral Liturgy Conference: Ultimately, I am the word, the word that is heard.[35] Ralph Waldo Emerson insisted that “the preacher should be a poet.” He meant that “a man’s sermon should be rammed with life.”[36] That is why, in the midst of a famous iconoclastic address at the Harvard Divinity School on July 15, 1838, he railed at the junior pastor of his grandfather Ripely’s church in Concord:

I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more. . . . He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived or acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. . . . Not a line did he draw out of a real history. The true preacher can always be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life,—life passed through the fire of thought.[37]

It is understandable that our people hear no word from us intimating that we are married or “in love.” It passes understanding that our people rarely sense from the homiletic word that our hearts are in anguish because Christians are murdering Christians in Northern Ireland, because ten million Americans go to bed hungry each night, because human rights are bloodied in South Africa, because two hundred thousand homeless humans have to defecate at curbstones in Calcutta, because on my street there are people who are lonely or hungry or scared. Can they feel that I get angry, that I cry, that I beat my fists against a wall in frustration, that I shout out to God against his own seeming injustice? Or do they feel that in my case “the just word” is just a word and nothing more?

At this point I am speechless. After three months of relentless research and reflection, after mountains
of paper and a million words, after fifty-six minutes of close reasoning and impassioned argument, what I put to you most urgently on preaching the just word goes beyond the word that is preached. I phrase it in two questions. (1) Do you live the just word you preach? Are you, as St. James put it, a “doer” of the just word, “a doer that acts” (Jas 1:22-25), or do you simply speak it? Does your just word leap forth from some experience of our sorry human condition? Is it your life that passes through the fire of your thought? (2) How do you celebrate the just word, the Word who is Justice? Do the faithful sense that it is your body too that is being offered for them, your blood too that is being shed for them? From your celebration of transcendence, do they experience the God who enables them to “execute justice”?

Father Walter J. Burghardt, SJ (1914–2008) taught historical theology for 32 years at Woodstock Theological College, and was a professor at Catholic University and a visiting lecturer at Union Theological Seminary and Princeton Seminary. A prolific writer, renowned preacher, and devoted ecumenist, Fr. Burkhardt authored more than 25 books and 300 articles, and served for 23 years as editor-in-chief of the Journal Theological Studies. He also founded and directed Preaching the Just Word, a project of the Woodstock Theological Center. The Beecher lectures on preaching, which he delivered at Yale Divinity School in 1994, were collected and expanded into a book published by Yale University Press in 1996.

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[8] Apostolicam actuositatem, no. 5; see also no. 7. In response to this quotation, one might dredge up the affirmation of Gaudium et spes, no. 42: “Christ, to be sure, gave his Church no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose which he set before it is a religious one. . . . “ Here the
crucial terms are missio propria and finis . . . ordinis religiosi. Discussion these phrases is not possible here, but two observations seem in order. (1) GS 42 is not excluding the Christian community from playing a significant, transforming role in the social, economic, and political orders. Such an interpretation would make nonsense out of Part 1, chapter 4. The text reaffirms the legitimate autonomy that belongs to the temporal order. For the historical background of this chapter (nos. 40–45) and an insightful presentation of its meaning, see Yves Congar’s chapter “The Role of the Church in the Modern World,” in Hebert Vorgrimpler, ed., Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II 5 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 202–23. For example, “The Church’s function comprises everything human. . . . Consequently the Church must not be restricted to a ‘religious’ domain, identical in practice with public worship” (213). (2) There is a problem on what “Church” means in chapter 4. Charles Moeller argues, from the proposed amendments, that whereas in chapter 1 to 3 it means “the People of God,” in chapter 4 it refers to the hierarchy (ibid., 61–62). Congar (ibid., 211 and 214 [see n. 28 for pertinent relatio]), without alluding to Moeller’s position, says the Church in chapter 4 is “the People of God,” “the social body.” The difference in interpretation of “Church” is obviously not irrelevant to one’s understanding of the Church’s mission.


[13] Address of Pope John Paul II opening the deliberations of the Third Assembly of Latin American Bishops, Puebla, January 28, 1979, III, 2. An English translation is available in Origins 8, no. 34 (Feb. 8. 1979) 530–38; but I have not used it for the passage quoted, because it translates indispensable as “essential” (536), apparently unaware of the problem to which I allude in n. 9 above. I take it that the Pope and/or his speechwriter consciously avoided a philosophical interpretation of the 1971 Synod’s ratio constitutiva; it is enough that a facet of the Church’s evangelizing mission be described as something that the Church may not refuse to do; it is not capable of being dispensed with; the Church cannot be released from this obligation. The Pope goes on to cite Paul VI’s Evangelli nuntiandi, no. 29: “evangelization would not be complete if it did not take into account the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man’s concrete life, both personal and social” (Origins 536).


“The Mass and Political Order,” Proceedings of the Liturgical Conference, Worcester, Mass., August 1955: “Shortly after World War II an extremely well-informed German priest told me, on what I am prepared to accept as reliable evidence, that the Nazis, far from being worried about the pre-war growth of the liturgical movement in Germany, secretly encouraged it. According to my informant, they felt that an intense preoccupation with the liturgy would serve to distract the attention of Catholics and make them less inclined to engage in political action. Whether this report is accurate or not, the record will show, I think, that some of those most actively engaged in the liturgical movement not only in Germany but in other countries as well did make the mistake of ignoring political and social problems or, even worse, of at least passively favoring political programs which they should have actively opposed” (130–31).


[20] Ibid., 111.


[23] Ibid., 54.


[26] See Socrates, Church History 6, 18; Sozomen, Church History 8, 20.

[27] John Paul II, Homily, Mass in Independence Plaza, Santo Domingo, Jan 25, 1979 (Origins 8, 34 [Feb. 8, 1979] 543). I am aware that the Pope does go on to speak of a “more divine world” as well, “the vertical orientation of evangelization” (ibid.).


[29] Ibid., 76.


George Higgins, “The Problem in Preaching: Politics/What Place in Church?” Origins 2, no. 13 (Sept. 21, 1972) 213. The whole article (207, 212–16) merits reading for its wedding of the theoretical and the practical, based on the respected author’s long and varied experience.

Quoted by Higgins, ibid., 216.

See “The Word Made Flesh Today” (n. 24 above) 125.

Quoted by Joel Porte, “‘I Am Not the Man You Take Me For,’” Harvard Magazine 81, no. 5 (May–June 1979) 50.

Ibid., 50–51.

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Composing the Hymn for the Holy Year of Mercy

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

On March 13, 2015 Pope Francis made the following announcement:

“Dear brothers and sisters, I have often thought of how the Church may render more clear her mission to be a witness to mercy; and we have to make this journey. It is a journey which begins with spiritual conversion. Therefore, I have decided to announce an Extraordinary Jubilee which has at its centre the mercy of God. It will be a Holy Year of Mercy. We want to live in the light of the word of the Lord: ‘Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful’ (cf. Lk 6:36).”

A number of events would take place in Rome in the course of the Holy Year, bookended by the solemn opening of the Holy Door in St. Peter’s on December 8, 2015 and its closing on November 20, 2016, which would be mirrored by the opening and closing of other holy doors in major churches all around the world.

The prospect of perhaps being able to contribute in some way to an extraordinary outpouring of mercy in the spirit of Vatican II was very much in my mind as I sat down on April 9, the Thursday of Easter Week, to start to think about the text.

On March 31, 2015, Monsignor Massimo Palombella, the Maestro di Cappella of the Sistine Chapel Choir, sent an email with attachments to ninety composers around the world, of whom I was one. One of the attachments was a letter of invitation to recipients, dated March 30, to “submit a score for candidacy for the Hymn for the Holy Year of Mercy.” The second attachment was the text of the Hymn itself, as “defined” by a “restricted commission of the Holy See.” “In ‘ecclesial’ logic,” continued the invitation, “it has been thought necessary to have a competition to identify composers with the greatest experience of composing music for the Liturgy. The hymns composed will be judged by a commission which will choose one, proposing any necessary modifications.”

The Holy See had published a jubilee hymn previously, for the Millennium Year 2000. On that occasion the composer had been Jean-Paul Lécot, director of music of the domaine in Lourdes, who was not among those invited to participate on this occasion.

The invitation laid down some rather strict “indications” concerning settings to be submitted:

1. The Hymn has a litany structure (on the model of the Laudes Regiae) and so what is in italics and in
boldface type (a sort of “interpolation”) needs to be easily singable by the Assembly.

2. Obviously the assembly interventions need to be singable and repeatable immediately after a single hearing. The “litanic” responses of the Assembly (those in italics) should always have the same melody.

3. The parts that are not in italics and not in bold are to be entrusted to the Schola and should also, in a basic version, be singable (if necessary) also by the assembly or by a soloist.

Furthermore, “The Hymn shall be translated into the main European languages.”

Additional stipulations followed:

1. One version should be written for Schola in 4 voices (SCTB); and in 2 disparate voices (women and men) and in 2 equal voices (SC; TB)
2. The text in bold should also be elaborated in 4 voices (SCTB) and for Assembly.

Then came the cruncher. The closing date for submissions was May 11, just six weeks from the date of the invitation, which itself had arrived on the Tuesday of Holy Week, the busiest time of the year for pastoral musicians! (One result of this was that, out of ninety composers invited, only twenty-one eventually submitted completed settings.)

In reading Pope Francis’s bull Misericordiae Vultus setting up the Holy Year of Mercy, I had been struck by his exhortation that “we need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace,” and even more so by the fact that he had chosen the date for the opening of the Year because it would be the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, and “the Church feels a great need to keep this event alive”! The prospect of perhaps being able to contribute in some way to an extraordinary outpouring of mercy in the spirit of Vatican II was very much in my mind as I sat down on April 9, the Thursday of Easter Week, to start to think about the text. For reference I quote here the first few lines as provided by Msgr Palombella:

Misericòrdes sìcut Pater! [cfr Lc 6, 36] [motto anno d. Miser.]

1. Rendiàmo grazie al Padre, perché è buono
   in aetèrnum misericòrdia eius [cfr Sal 135/6]
   ha creato il mòndo con sapiènza
   in aeternum misericordia eius
   conduce il suo pòpolo nella stòria
   in aeternum misericordia eius
   perdòna e accòglie i suoi figli [cfr Lc 15, ss]
   in aeternum misericordia eius

The remainder continued in the same way, with the two-line Misericordes refrain appearing only after verses 2 and 4.

The first thing that was very clear was that the Latin refrain and litany responses would be best remaining in Latin, as a unifying component for use all around the world. Next, it seemed obvious that the verses could not be set in any kind of meter, as they would need to be singable in many different languages with different rhythmic characteristics. Third, the five-syllable word Misericordes looked as if it would be a compositional difficulty. Fourth, although nothing had been said in the brief concerning accompaniment, I wanted whatever accompaniment there would be to work with guitars as well as with
keyboard instruments. That would dictate a certain harmonic simplicity.

It is my normal practice when faced with a new text to say it, either aloud or in my head, many times over, to live with it and try to distill the essential rhythm of it. In particular, I was concerned about finding a rhythm for that word Misericordes that would be both accessible and memorable. In trying to pitch the mood at the right level, I was very conscious that this was music which would be used in a variety of different ritual contexts, and that it would need to be sufficiently simple to be of real service to people of the most basic accomplishments while not being so simplistic that the more skilled would turn up their noses at it.

What I ended up with was a metrical refrain consisting of a phrase sung once in E-flat major and then repeated down a third in C minor. My friends tell me that I sometimes over-use sequence, but I find it a most useful congregational “hook.” Despite my dislike for beginning a phrase on the half-beat, because I think it can sometimes make it awkward for people to know when to come in, the word Misericordes itself seemed to dictate using such a beginning. The use of sequence would mean that people would not only have room to breathe, they would hear (and feel) the same half-beat beginning a second time and so get used to it more quickly. The idiom of the refrain was unashamedly in the style of Jacques Berthier’s Taizé music with simple root-position chords and a 4-3 suspension. I decided to have it sung after verse 1 and 3 as well as 2 and 4.

For the verses, I opted for an extremely simple Gelineau-style tone, just two notes in one phrase, descending, three notes in the other, ascending, with the same metrical mini-refrain at the end of each line to avoid confusion. Here, too, I had in mind the stipulation that the verses could, at a pinch, even be done by the assembly if a cantor or schola was not available. The rhythmical similarity of my treatment of the word misericordia to Misericordes was an added bonus and helped to give the whole piece some cohesion. I deliberately lengthened the ter of in aeternum [for ever] to emphasize the idea of God’s mercy being everlasting. The Cm7-Fm6/C chord progression in the first line of the verse and the 4-3 suspension at the end of the litany response were intended to convey a sense of mercifulness. Because each verse consisted of four lines and not two, I simply repeated the same music for lines 3 and 4, thus making it easier for singers to learn.

Many people have told me that I “had mercy” on those who sang and prayed the Hymn because it was not too complicated, even though a handful of others have condemned the music as being too simple. I myself did not consider it to be the greatest or most original music I had ever written (!), but I hoped that the combination of Taizé-style refrain and Gelineau-style verses might fill the bill. On April 10, I completed the music and provided an English and a French translation (I am fluent in French and experienced with French liturgical texts) and put the piece on one side to “brew.” By May 11, no further inspiration had come to me, so I sent the score off to the Vatican and forgot about it.
On June 11, I was surprised to receive another email from Msgr. Palombella, informing me that my piece had been chosen as the winner of the competition. They required a single note to be modified: the final two notes of the litany response originally dropped a fourth from G to D; the last note would now be a G. I was happy to agree to that, and had already been thinking that a G might be better.

The email continued:

“We would also like a sextet brass prelude (two trumpets, two horns, one trombone and one tuba) and two interludes (or three) for the brass sextet (these interludes should be after the refrain ‘misericordes sicut pater’ and finish in C minor).

We would also like a polyphonic coda for chorus a cappella (SATB) finishing in C major.

The Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization will contact you officially for legal issues.”

I responded, asking if July 3 would be soon enough to do all this additional work. By return, I received a reply saying that the “coda polifonica” was extremely urgent because the Sistina would be recording the piece with Vatican Radio during the coming week! Though the brass parts could wait until the beginning of July, it would be good to have the prelude now so that they could record that as well (in the event, they didn’t). So I then spent the entire next twenty-four hours writing and engraving all the additional material, converting it all to XML as Msgr. Palombella uses the Sibelius music-engraving program rather than the Finale system, and sent it off on June 14.

At the same time I contacted an old friend of mine, Fr. Eugenio Costa, who works in the Jesuit Curia beside St. Peter’s Basilica and is very well connected, asking him if he knew anything about the competition. To my astonishment and delight, I discovered that he was the author of the text (the commission having made him modify it several times). I had first met Eugenio at a meeting of Universa Laus in England as far back as 1973.

People used the Hymn as a stand-alone sung item at the beginning of a service, during the presentation of the gifts, during the distribution of Communion, during the anointing of the sick, and accompanying the hearing of individual confessions during a service of reconciliation, but also more creatively as a sung response (refrain only) to an intercessions litany and in other ways.

The next day, June 15, I received a phone call from the Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council. He told me that normally in these circumstances people donate their work to the Holy Father and asked me if I was willing to do that. I answered Yes, and asked if I could tell people about the competition. No, came the answer, not until the Pontifical Council officially announces it. That did not happen until seven and a half weeks later, on August 6, after all my summer conferences were over. In the meantime, I had been flown out to Rome in the last week of July to sign an Act of Donation in the presence of the Vatican Notary (no graphic of my signature embedded in a Word or PDF document for him!), and I was told that I could not tell anyone about that either.

Despite rumors to the contrary, neither Eugenio nor I received a penny for our work. The Hymn was
made available free of charge to anyone who wanted to use it (only publishers were required to enter an agreement with the Pontifical Council). This is also the place to say that a few people criticised the piece because it was a Litany, rather than a Hymn. The descriptor “Hymn” was chosen not by me but by those responsible for organizing the Holy Year of Mercy, as can be seen in the letter of invitation quoted near the beginning of this essay and on the Jubilee of Mercy official website.

Initially that website carried the Hymn verses just in Italian, English and French. People were asking me about other languages, so I asked other Universa Laus and NPM friends to help me produce Spanish, Portuguese, German . . . Other languages followed: Russian, Lithuanian . . . In addition I was asked to produce assembly editions in various formats, three-part choir versions, bilingual versions, and so on. All of that material, and much else (audio clips, video clips, my own brass parts and scores) was done in my own time and during the period from August to November, gradually appeared on my own website.

The version originally posted on the Vatican website also omitted all the guitar chord symbols that I had provided. When I reminded them that this might well exclude a huge number of potential users of the Hymn, they quickly reinstated the chords!

Another Universa Laus friend, Jesuit Fr. Vlastimil Dufka, invited me to Bratislava in November 2015 to supervise a video recording to be made for the Slovak Bishops Conference, using his Slovak translation of the verses. For this purpose he asked me to compose instrumental parts for flute, oboe (he being an oboist), and cello. You will find the instrumental parts and an audio recording, at the web page referenced above. A fine video recording is reproduced here:

The Slovak Bishops’ Catholic Radio station then asked for a “logo” or signature tune for brass that they could use throughout the Holy Year of Mercy in their daily broadcasts. I adapted the brass music I had already written and added some new material. All of that is also available on the same web page.

I was privileged to be able to attend both the opening of the Holy Door at St. Peter’s in December 2015 and its closing in November 2016. In addition I attended several other diocesan door openings, and walked through many more local holy doors in the course of the year. The huge amount of (unpaid) time and effort I put into building up the web page during those four months in the Fall of 2015 was amply compensated by the great sense I had of the whole world praying through this Holy Year, basking in an awareness of the mercifulness of God. I received hundreds of letters, phone calls, emails, photos, PDFs, and audio and video files of celebrations all over the world. In some cases, these translated the Latin refrains into local languages too, as in the Chinese version and the Arabic version (possibly my favourite because of how well it demonstrates inculturation [see below]), both to be found on the same web page. People used the Hymn as a stand-alone sung item at the beginning of a service, during the presentation of the gifts, during the distribution of Communion, during the anointing of the sick, and accompanying the hearing of individual confessions during a service of reconciliation, but also more creatively as a sung response (refrain only) to an intercessions litany and in other ways.

The many compliments, written and spoken, that I received were truly humbling. One priest described how moving he had found it just to walk slowly in procession, singing the Hymn all the way up the Via della Conciliazione to the Holy Door. The most amazing and gratifying aspect of the whole experience for me, however, was the realization that literally millions of people all over the world were praying “in unison,” a symbol of God at work in the Universal Church.
Paul Inwood is an internationally-known liturgist, composer, organist, choral director, author and clinician. His work is found in hymnbooks across the English-speaking world, and he is a frequent contributor to liturgical journals, blogs and forums. He was responsible for the introduction of the music of Taizé into the UK in the 1970s and the music of the Iona Community into the USA in the 1980s. From 1986 to 1998 he was a president of the international liturgical music study group Universa Laus, and in 2009 he was honored as Pastoral Musician of the Year by the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. In 2015 he was named as composer of the official Vatican Hymn for the Holy Year of Mercy. www.magnificatmusic.com

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Living as Sacramental Jars of Clay

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

_Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God._

For the last seventeen years, Zion Korean United Methodist Church in Warwick, Rhode Island has celebrated Holy Communion every Sunday. Immediately before communion, all of the worshippers are invited to sing the hymn, “Change My Heart, Oh God,” in either English or Korean (and sometimes in Spanish). This is the text:

Change my heart, Oh God, make it ever true.
Change my heart, Oh God, may I be like you.
You are the potter, I am the clay,
Mold me and make me, this is what I pray.
Change my heart, Oh God, make it ever true.
Change my heart, Oh God, may I be like you.[1]

When we are before Christ’s Table, we are reminded that we are clay jars, earthen vessels made by the Master Artist’s hands. We are fragile but blessed: we are wounded, offended, and foolish, just like everyone else; but, at the same time, we are faithful, resilient, and persistent in sharing and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are clay jars that are weak but which become strong through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, who helps us to keep our eyes and hearts open to see the treasure that dwells and shines within us.

As we celebrate weekly Communion, we are continually nurtured to be formed and transformed into a disciple-making congregation: “disciple-making” is a shared vocation that strongly connects United Methodist congregations with one another. When we join in Communion, we are especially invited to grow in “loving Jesus, honestly repenting of our sin, and seeking to live in peace with one another.”[2] We do not see this as a condition for the reception of Communion but as a constant invitation to the growth of faith. We practice open communion in which all are welcome to the Lord’s Table!

When the bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given, we remember God’s self-giving love embodied in and through Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. Through this remembrance, _anamnesis_ in biblical Greek, we are invited to see, taste and experience the living presence of Christ in the present. Along with this fundamental remembrance of Jesus, we also experience Jesus’s feeding the crowds, his breaking the bread at the Last Supper and at the dinner table in Emmaus. In this way, Holy Communion becomes a mirror image of Jesus’s ministry for God’s reign in the midst of outcasts. In Christ’s loving presence, our ongoing journey of faith is also guided by the vision of God’s final banquet, in which
Sometimes, however, the invitation to live out or echo God’s reign, God’s self-giving love, or discipleship becomes too big, heavy, or abstract to be understood or carried. Receiving bread and wine (or grape juice), therefore, we also remember Jesus’s tears, struggles, and suffering on the cross. We are reminded of our own weakness and brokenness; as clay jars who cherish the treasure that is Jesus (2 Cor. 4:7), we are invited to embrace our own limitation in the context of God’s abiding grace. At the end of Communion, we are called to “give ourselves for others” in the heartening presence of the Holy Spirit. We are broken but empowered.

We are clay jars that are weak but which become strong through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, who helps us to keep our eyes and hearts open to see the treasure that dwells and shines within us.

During Communion, each verse of the hymn, “God Who Created All,” which has a Korean traditional tune, is sung as part of the Great Thanksgiving. We also sing hymns from many different cultures, such as “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ,” whose tune comes from a Jamaican folk melody. Multicultural musical instruments are also used, and images from various cultures are projected onto a screen using PowerPoint slides. By being exposed to culturally diverse hymns and images, we are invited to experience the varied gifts of the Holy Spirit that are embedded and embodied in different cultural, social, and historical contexts.

Children and youth join Communion every Sunday, too, making our worship service not only culturally-conscious, but also intergenerational: “Come, the table is ready!” When children come forward to receive the bread and grape juice, the presiding minister and assisting ministers bend down, making sure they are on eye-level with the children. Children and youth see, hear, and taste God’s loving grace through the presence of Jesus and the care extended to them by their parents’ generation. Culturally conscious images and hymns help children and youth to acquire self-respect and cultural confidence as Korean-American Christians. We believe that the more children (and adults, too) develop a sense of self-worth in God, the more they understand and appreciate the sanctity and preciousness of others and of all God’s creation.

The institution narrative (“Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you . . . . Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me”) and the epiclesis (invocation of the Spirit) invite people to experience the presence (or at least the nearness) of Jesus tangibly so that they will be open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. As an immigrant congregation, members of which and others who attend our worship services come from many different denominational backgrounds, or no Christian backgrounds, we continually invite people to meet the living Christ at the Table and beyond. United Methodists believe that Jesus Christ is “truly present” in Holy Communion.

Holy Communion also makes us look into our “inside world” more deeply.
Members of the Zion congregation have gratefully affirmed that the weekly celebration of Holy Communion has changed them to “become more deeply aware of the abiding grace of Jesus Christ,” “learn the central meaning of worship and communal lives of faith,” “experience a sense of belonging in the body of Christ,” “grow closer to God and God’s people,” and so on. Children and youth also experience that they are loved by Jesus and the community of faith; they feel that they are invited to join a family dinner.

Holy Communion has led the Zion community of faith to see God’s acts beyond the sacramental ritual itself. Just like the bread on the table, as the beloved children of God, we are invited to imagine that we are “called to become bread for the world: bread that is taken, blessed, broken, and given” as Henri Nouwen suggests.[6] Holy Communion keeps reminding us who we are as members of the body of Christ individually and collectively; we are called to embody Christ’s self-giving love instead of existing as a self-serving organization. In order to invite people to understand and live out Christ’s Table in the world and in their daily lives, from time to time we introduce some encouraging quotes along with multicultural images that are projected onto the screen:

“Participation in the Eucharist bears fruit in the world in attitudes and actions of personal and social holiness.” (This Holy Mystery)[7]

“The Christ revealed in water, bread, and wine is a breaker of barriers among people, a builder of community, a champion of the poor and marginalized, the Prince of Peace, and the advocate of justice. The living out of our identity as a people of the sacraments requires us to join with Christ in this work.” (Gale C. Felton)[8]

“The eucharist is an act of thanksgiving consisting of a covenantal gesture of breaking, sharing, and pouring out one’s life for others. To eat sumptuously while others starved was antieucharistic and antiecclesial, ‘a sin against the body of the Lord.’” (Aloysius Pieris)[9]

“Eucharist forms us in thanksgiving, focuses our sense of God’s presence in all of life, prepares us for faithful discipleship, and renews the body of Christ.” (Ruth C. Duck)[10]

As a part of our community engagement, often called the Table of Life in the world, we have worked together with the Rhode Island State Council of Churches (RISCC) partaking in intercultural, ecumenical and interfaith interactions and prayer actions for social justice, reconciliation, “glocal” health, and the like.

Holy Communion also makes us look into our “inside world” more deeply. As one of Matthew’s beatitudes indicates, we are invited and nurtured in order to “get our inside world—our mind and heart—put right,” so that “we can see God in the outside world.” (Matt. 5:8, MSG). This modified translation of the seventh beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (NRSV), expresses what Zion congregants would like to become day by day. We pray that our “inside world” will be constantly transformed by Jesus Christ who is truly present in our weekly celebration of Holy Communion and in our daily footsteps. In this way, our mind and heart continue to be cultivated as the place where we deeply experience our belovedness, rootedness in God, and genuine gratitude (Eucharist—eucharistia in Greek—means giving thanks to God, especially in the New Testament[11]).
We also recognize that our lives are woven in and inter-connected with a bigger jar of clay, the entire creation.

In the process of being transformed, we become more aware of God’s grace everywhere and all the time: when we meet people, eat foods, enjoy nature, and so on. Ordinary things, people, our experiences, communities, and creation can be sacramental when they become “channels” that reveal the invisible God’s grace and presence. Just as Jesus “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb 1:3),[12] we too would like to become sacramental, reflecting God’s self-giving love as we participate in God’s ongoing present and eschatological acts for the reign of God.

We are the clay, and God is our potter (Isa. 64:8). As Paul and his colleagues said that they were like clay jars that are weak and easily broken (2 Cor. 4:7), we admit that we are clay jars too. We also recognize that our lives are woven in and interconnected with a bigger jar of clay, the entire creation. Since all lives created from the clay of this earth are easily cracked and broken, we ask for God’s help to change our hearts so that we can be more gentle and compassionate to each other and to all lives, especially to those who are weak, marginalized, and victimized. Although it may be hardly noticeable, we may water the flowers through our broken selves, which also become the ways through which the light of the Good News shines forth. Holy Communion is a time for us to lay down our hearts and lives before God, so that God will heal us, make us whole, and lead us to live as sacramental jars of clay. May God bless and keep us so that our journey constantly shows God’s hidden face. We walk that journey daily, on common and holy ground![13]

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[5] Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2005), 23. It is worth noting that “Christ’s presence is not limited to particular words or actions or object; it is in the totality of the experience.” See ibid.


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Last year in the course of my research, I had the opportunity to listen to Arab and Jewish youth rehearsing music together in an orchestra and a choir in Israel.[1] These young people came from varied backgrounds. They live in a society deeply marked by conflict and carry the effects of that conflict within their identities and worldviews. Yet here they were: playing the same music, struggling with the same tricky violin part, or singing a choral piece together.

In a world filled with conflict, what does it mean to be a peacemaker? How can music fit into the building of God’s kingdom? There are many ways to answer Jesus’s call to make peace, and music can be one of them. But how can we build peace in the relationships around us through music?

What Is Peacebuilding?

A few definitions of key concepts will help to clarify what this work entails. In recent years, the term peacebuilding has become the common term for the work of making peace. It began to surface in the 1970s through the work of Dr. Johan Galtung, one of the founders of modern peace studies. Peacebuilding refers to an active engagement in making and sustaining peace before, during, and after conflicts. This term is used in contrast to “peacemaking,” which generally refers to diplomatic efforts, such as those undertaken by the United Nations, or “peacekeeping” and “peace enforcement,” which are usually used when military forces are called upon to keep the peace.

Conflict is, of course, a normal part of human existence and can have both positive and negative results. In general, conflict arises when the goals or needs of one party are not met or are seen as incompatible with those of another. Since conflict is common and can lead to constructive or destructive outcomes, it is important to understand its roots and acquire tools to help it become a force of constructive change.

The term conflict transformation, similar to the more widely-used conflict resolution, was coined by John Paul Lederach. He defines the goal of conflict transformation as being “to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.”[2]

One major tool in conflict transformation is constructive dialogue. True dialogue can happen only when
one values the person more than the argument. In fact, it is not a dialogue if we try to win a debate. We need to listen actively and seek to understand or empathize with the other. **Empathy**, or the ability to put ourselves into and feel another’s experience, is also crucial to transforming conflict.

**The Role of Music**

In light of these definitions, the role of music as an effective tool in building peace can become clearer. Music is an art often performed in ensembles. It provides opportunities for people to see humanity in one another, helping them to break down barriers and find common ground. Music provides a vehicle through which they can express emotion and build empathy. The power of music to build empathy was illustrated by a fascinating study in which children were given group games to play that promoted contact, imitation, memory, sharing, and flexibility. The games of one group had a musical component, while those of the control group did not have music. This study showed that the children with the musical component to their interaction had a greater increase in empathy over the children without music.[3]

Making music together, as happens in congregational singing, creates beauty and builds relationships in several ways. In effect, we become one body with many voices. When singing in unison, many voices combine into one. When singing in parts, each voice has its role and range, and together they create a beautiful harmonic tapestry. Whenever we sing with others, whether in unison or in parts, we must listen as we sing. This teaches us not only to make sound, but to hear sound and respond to what we hear. This dialogical foundation also stands at the core of transforming conflict, peacebuilding, and worship itself. It is an essential ingredient in how we bless others with our music.

> When singing in unison, many voices combine into one. When singing in parts, each voice has its role and range, and together they create a beautiful harmonic tapestry.

The use of music in building peace is hardly new. Music has been used fruitfully in many situations of conflict, including public protests and community gatherings for healing. Freedom songs and anti-apartheid songs have rallied resistance against injustice. Patriotic songs help to bring a nation together. The earliest Anabaptist hymnal, called the *Ausbund*, was written by believers who were imprisoned for their faith in the sixteenth century. These hymns were used (and are still in use even today) to tell the stories to keep that community together and grounded in the nonviolent teaching of Jesus that is central to the Anabaptist faith.

It is important to realize, however, that although music can unite, it can also be used to divide. It has been used to stoke fear and hatred and to bring one group closer together in hostile opposition to another group. Music is not necessarily a universal language, as is often touted. Although the “alphabet” of music is mostly universal, the syntax, vocabulary, and context can be interpreted very differently by different people. To give a simple example: a song that elicits happiness in one person may sound like a sad song to someone who hears it in a different social, cultural, or personal context. If music were truly a universal language, this same song would “translate” across contexts, generating the same affect and meaning. Music, all by itself, therefore does not make for peace. This is why empathy and practices of nonviolence are always needed to ground the creative work of music in the service of peace.
Simple Techniques

Building peace and transforming conflict are not necessarily easy. Just because people go to church or sing sacred songs does not mean that they are inherently good at it. We need to practice and to develop our skills for building peace through music. Some simple techniques can be used to foster community-building, dissolve barriers, improve empathy, create opportunities for dialogue, and thus work toward building peace through music.

Here are six examples from my own experience. They can be used in workshops, dialogues, retreats, meetings, Sunday School classes, rehearsals, and even in the school classroom. I have used them in all these types of settings.

1. **Sing together!** I cannot overemphasize the importance of singing together. Explain to the gathered group how we collectively breathe the same air to produce this sound. We harmonize, showing that we each play a distinct role in producing this one body of sound. We listen to each other as an act of service and empathy. If the group with which you are working is not accustomed to singing *a cappella*, try some songs that can be sung as a round or ones that are familiar enough to harmonize with. You will be amazed how powerful the experience of singing without instrumental accompaniment can be. Trust your community of singers (no matter the skill level); they can do it!

2. **Teach a song by rote.** This is sometimes called paperless singing as no written music is needed. This form of teaching can be a helpful equalizer for those who are less musically literate. Choose songs or hymns that can be taught by call and response, with repetition, or even with bodily motions. Motions can provide a kinesthetic form of learning which improves memory of the song. The use of repetition or call and response encourages active listening and empathy, both of which are important muscles in building peace.

   *It is important to realize, however, that although music can unite, it can also be used to divide. . . . . Music is not necessarily a universal language, as is often touted.*

Aside from singing, the following techniques can be interactive and effective for building peace when working with small groups:

3. **Go around a circle** to learn names or to check-in to see how each person is doing (emotionally, physically, spiritually, etc.). Each person presents their name, emotion, or an action or sound that describes them. After each person gives their response, all other members respond by repeating it to show acceptance and understanding.

4. **Group breathing exercises** in which the leader encourages the group members to pay attention to their breath can also be effective. During the pause between inhalation and exhalation, ask each member to snap their fingers. The resulting rhythm is an original work by the gathered body. The leader can then ask people to hum or sing a pitch on the exhale, and in this way the group begins to improvise music together. Ask members to feel the sound within themselves as well as listening to those around them.

5. **Drum circles** have been a popular activity to bring people together around music that does not require singing. Drums, other percussion instruments, and even body percussion (stomps, claps, etc.)
can be used. A leader starts out with a general rhythm. Others are encouraged to join in with the exact rhythm, something simpler, or with embellishments. As the rhythm is established, the leader can encourage certain people to play out, give a solo, or even initiate a call and response. This passing around of focus can be done using body language, eye contact, or verbal directions if needed. Encourage members to listen to someone else and play rhythms that complement the other in some way. Leaders should practice or be trained before facilitating a group drum circle.

6. **Encourage creativity through exploration of sound.** One example of this exercise would be an activity called the paper game, in which each person explores different sounds using a piece of paper. One person initiates a sound; then the others observe this sound, imitate it, or initiate another sound. As time goes on, you will find that there are many more ways of making sound with a scrap of paper than you ever would have imagined.

These are a few examples of ways to foster cooperation and empathy and build peace in everyday life at the grassroots level through music. While this will not cause international geopolitical change, by bringing people together through music, finding common ground, improving empathy, and encouraging constructive dialogue, we can all be more active and effective participants in Jesus’s call to be peacemakers. This is important because we know that changes made at grassroots levels can have much larger impacts.

Leonard Bernstein, the centenary of whose birth is being celebrated this year, spoke many times of the power of music and the need to bring peace to a world where conflict often results in destructive deeds. Following John F. Kennedy’s assassination, Bernstein said, “This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.” May this be so; blessed are those who build peace.

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[1] This took place at The Polyphony Foundation, a conservatory in Israel whose founder was influenced by what he experienced as a musician in the internationally-acclaimed West Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said in 1999. The Polyphony Foundation follows a model similar to The West Eastern Divan, with an emphasis on education and bringing Arabs and Jews together equitably through music.


What Kind of Righteousness? What Kind of Blessing?

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Nishizaka Hill, on the outskirts of Nagasaki, is the site of the Twenty-Six Martyrs Museum and Monument. It was built to commemorate the martyrdom of twenty-six men and three children who were hung with chains and ropes on crosses there and then slaughtered. The year was 1597, the inauguration of an era of great persecution of Christians in Japan. After being imprisoned, they had been forced to march 480 miles from Kyoto in the winter cold. The crosses were lined up and waiting for them on the hill. As legend goes, one of the boys, seeing the crosses, said, “Show me my cross.” The other boy followed with “Show me mine.”[1]

This cry, “Show me my cross,” represented a defiant acceptance of a righteousness that is not of this world. It was, in the midst of extreme persecution, an extraordinary declaration of Jesus’ teaching: “If any would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 6:24).

The eighth beatitude, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness” amplifies this very point. If it is true that we meet Jesus on a cross rather than a throne, and the cross stands at the very center of our faith, surely it follows that persecution will come even to the most righteous among us, along with the strange promise of blessing.

But what kind of righteousness are we talking about? What kind of blessing is found in persecution?

If it is true that we meet Jesus on a cross rather than a throne, and the cross stands at the very center of our faith, surely it follows that persecution will come even to the most righteous among us, along with the strange promise of blessing.

Being righteous, after all, is quite different from “feeling righteous”—a feeling that can be powerfully attractive. There’s a wonderful energy that comes from feeling that we are on “the right side” of things,
a satisfaction in shaking our fists at those sinners out there who “don’t get it,” who are ignorant of the truth we see, and so choose, willfully, to go the wrong way. This “righteous” energy can be so delightful, in fact, that it carries us to places we didn’t intend to go.

I think of a conversation I had with a church member years ago, a gracious and giving woman whom I respected greatly. She grew up in Germany during the rise of the Nazi state before her family emigrated to the United States. She shared, with some confusion and dismay: “I still remember fondly the Nazi rallies of my childhood! They were far more inspiring than anything I ever felt in church! We lit candles as we dedicated ourselves to serving others, to bringing peace, and to the welfare of the world. We sang moving hymns that promoted dedication to a cause beyond our own selfish interests. We were motivated to become strong, disciplined and persevering. As a child, how could I know what I was praising and what the outcome of such rallies would be?”

Indeed, there is something almost addictively attractive about our desire to be “right.” When dressed up as a righteous cause, bigotry and even violence can find easy justification. The conviction that we ourselves are righteous quiets our insecurities and fears, and unites us against perceived enemies. A shared enemy can unite even the most divided congregation as the group rallies righteously against the threat of “them”—whoever “they” might be!

Witness how the fear of Communism in the 1950s united Americans—at great cost to those who lost jobs, and even their homes, because of rumors or their refusal to disavow Communism. So energizing was the sense of righteousness generated by fighting “the Reds” that toward the end of the Cold War, Georgi Arbatov, an advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev, told a group of American journalists: “We are going to do something terrible to you—we are going to take away your enemy.”

The attractiveness of false conceptions of righteousness remains evident today, in our own society. A survey by the Public Religion Research Institute, for example, found that a majority of white evangelicals believe that Christians face discrimination in the United States and feel that Christians are more likely than Muslims to experience religious oppression. “Religious oppression” might be defined in a variety of ways, of course, but one measurement may give a clue. Muslims were the victims of 24% of all religious hate crimes in the country in 2016 while constituting only 1% of the population. Although Christians represent 70% of the U.S. population, only 11% of hate crimes are directed against them. Our national political leadership is 91% Christian-identified. Christians who are accustomed to occupying the cultural center of the country may be surprised when businesses or schools acknowledge the existence of other groups. But use of the term “the holiday season” hardly constitutes a “war on Christmas,” as has sometimes been argued!

Jesus was well aware of our tendency to make righteousness not only a cloak to cover our insecurities but also a sword to attack others. His very life and witness, ending on a cross, invites a different kind of journey into the notion of righteousness—a journey marked by humility, vulnerability, sacrifice, and forgiving love.

_The messy nature of righteousness as it is lived and embodied in the choices each of us makes became painfully obvious._
On April 4, 2018, the city of Memphis, Tennessee marked the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The city prepared for thousands of visitors to join them in significant reflection on the legacy of Dr. King. Internationally recognized speakers and civil rights leaders gathered. There were indictments to be made, failures to acknowledge; there was progress to be celebrated and commitments to be renewed.

With a publication date that coincided directly with this historic anniversary, the release of investigative reporter Marc Perrusquia’s *A Spy in Canaan* caused quite a stir, revealing that a local legend—the photographer Ernest Withers—had a double identity. He was not only a chronicler of the civil rights movement but also an FBI informant. This beloved man, now deceased—and his legacy—were being challenged by this previously unreleased information.

Memphians knew Withers as an affable presence, someone who bravely documented African-American history with his camera and shared that story with the world. Withers created some of the most iconic images of the civil rights era, notably, the famous photo of striking sanitation workers carrying the famous “I AM A MAN” signs. He has a street named after him. The Withers Collection Museum and Gallery on Beale Street is testimony to his work.

*A Spy in Canaan* opened a painful debate. Should Withers be remembered as a friend of the movement, as his many friends and family argued, or as a man who, as an FBI informant, betrayed not only Dr. King, but many personal friends and civil rights workers? Rev. Andrew Young had described Withers “...as a guy who ran significant risk to photograph and record our history. He always showed up. And that was important to us. Because that helped us get our story out.”[7]

Others could not ignore the painful consequences of his actions. “This man has ruined my life,” said Kathy Roop Hunnin, speaking of the depression she suffered after she lost her position with the federal government in 1986, when reports surfaced of FBI surveillance of her as a suspected Communist in the late 1960’s.[8]

Asked about the revelation, civil rights activist Rev. James Lawson refused to judge Withers, even though he himself had been subject to his betrayal. Dozens of tips about Lawson’s civil rights work and activities in Memphis had been turned over by Withers to the FBI through the years. Even so, Rev. Lawson named Withers not as a traitor to the cause, but as a father who had eight children to support; as someone who may not have fully understood the damage he might do; and as a man who trusted the FBI to use the information responsibly. “In the age in which we lived,” Lawson said, “we were not as aware.”[9]

It became impossible to neatly categorize Withers either as saint or sinner. Few people, including Marc Perrusquia himself, were eager to minimize either the good done by Withers or the pain he caused. The messy nature of righteousness as it is lived and embodied in the choices each of us makes became painfully obvious. Dr. Lawson’s words of forgiveness became an anchoring component of the dialogue, lifting us beyond neat categories of judgment and onto the cross itself.

Coretta Scott King wrote that “Martin’s repeated, unwarranted arrests . . . pushed me to the breaking point.” How did they survive at that breaking point and persist under the weight of such persecution? Dr. King spoke of learning to experience “unearned suffering as redemptive.” He likewise spoke of accepting persecution as “an opportunity to transform (himself) and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains.”[10]
King named forgiveness as a process of life, an attitude. He called it “the Christian weapon of social redemption” and “the solution of the race problem.” “We are to go out with the spirit of forgiveness, heal the hurts, right the wrongs and change society with forgiveness.”[11]

It is our need for forgiveness and our need to forgive that transforms righteousness from a self-justifying framework to a source of life. This understanding moves the ground of Christian righteousness from self-justification to the cross itself. Forgiveness is at the heart of Jesus’s proclamation on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” With those words, the righteousness of Jesus’s persecutors is called into question. They are the religious and political authorities, yet they do not understand. Filled with confidence in their own righteous judgment, they are condemning not just an innocent man, but the very embodiment of God’s grace in the world. Through forgiveness, the shallow ground of human understandings and applications of righteousness become a place of divine intervention and encounter.

“God is Love,” we proclaim. And the very understanding of God as a Trinitarian presence, as “three-in-one,” makes God a self-emptying presence. God is an “other” even unto Him/Herself in this dynamic interaction of Creating, Redeeming, and Sustaining presence and identity. Being created in the image of God, we find our deepest self-awareness in self-emptying love—in gestures of sacrifice and grace empowered from an encounter with a Loving Other, a source beyond our own brittle definitions of “right” and “wrong.”

It is our need for forgiveness and our need to forgive that transforms righteousness from a self-justifying framework to a source of life.

We are blessed when the presence of the cross enters our worship. I think of a moment when a developmentally challenged man had been asked to sing “Precious Lord” in worship. He had a beautiful voice and was well-rehearsed. Imagine my surprise when he rose to sing, and rather than facing the congregation, he moved in front of the communion table and faced the cross, kneeling! He sang with passion and devotion. When I asked him about it after the service, he said, “Jesus has always been my friend when I am in trouble or afraid. When I sing, I sing to him!” The power of a man, weak by the world’s standards, understanding the strength of the cross so profoundly—singing, “Precious Lord, take my hand”—could hardly be lost on the congregation.

As a Christian, I seek to engage in righteous work, that is, the work of “looking after orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27), feeding the hungry, uplifting the broken-hearted, speaking out for the oppressed. I denounce policies and behaviors that bring misery to God’s people. I speak up for the rights of the poor to food, shelter, health care, and decent wages. When I am criticized for this advocacy, I turn to the eighth beatitude, “Blessed are those who are persecuted . . .”, knowing, even as I do it, that what I am experiencing could hardly be called persecution.

But Jesus’s words stand as a poignant reminder, and an invitation, to leave defensive, self-justifying ground so that I might be lifted more fully into the embrace of a grace-filled God. The power of forgiveness—as I have received it and offered it—becomes most real to me in these moments.
I remember the boy’s question from Nishizaka Hill and ask myself: “Where is my cross?” On the cross, I see a calling to love with both forgiveness and vulnerability. On the cross, I see a righteousness that enables the new beginnings and the social transformation that Dr. King envisioned. On the cross, I see a place where the love of God can live through me in ways that extend beyond my own self-justification and ego.

And then, I can begin to see the invitation implicit in Jesus’s words: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness . . . theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Rev. Cheryl Cornish has been pastor of First Congregational Church in Memphis since 1988. Named as one of the 36 “Most Vital” congregations in the denomination, First Congregational has engaged in creative witness and partnership with the thirty other organizations housed within its facilities. Ministries of the church include the Revolutions Bicycle Co-op, the Global Goods Fair Trade Store, the Pilgrim House Hostel and “Voices of the South”, a regional theater. In 2003, Cheryl received Women of Achievement’s “Courage” award for her activism. She received the “Award for Distinction in Congregational Ministry” from Yale Divinity School in 2008. She is married to flamenco guitarist Mark Allen.


[8] Ibid., xvi

[9] Ibid, x-xi


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Beatitudes

By Stephen Gamboa-Diaz | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

Editor’s Note: Herménégilde Chiasson’s book-length poem, Beatitudes, has been called a postmodern Sermon on the Mount. It is considered one of his finest works. 49th Shelf, in presenting the work, observed: “For Herménégilde Chiasson, every work of art is both a cry and a prayer. Beatitudes reflects this perspective by connecting everyday events—people losing their keys or their cellphone signals—to the universal.” Composed in the form of a litany, the poem begins in mid-sentence, and ends with a comma. The following excerpt is taken from the beginning of the poem.

those who raise their heads in astonishment at the raucous cry of birds,

those who await the end of twilight,

those who ceaselessly leaf through catalogues and order nothing from life,

those who sleep on their side, waiting for the pain to subside in a single sip of water,

those who believe it is time to bear their misery, smiling through the procession of painful stupidities and offering atonement for the fullness of errors that are, in truth, so forgivable,

those who weep and find no consolation, confusing love with bitter anger in the loose thread of unravelling clothes,

those who walk ahead even though the wind blinds them,

they are, certainly, on their way to heaven;
those who lean heavily over countertops, whispering about their jeopardized affairs,
those who find their keys in the bottom of plastic bags they were about to throw out,
those who carry their food home in taxicabs,
those who stand up in public meetings where they believe they have recognized their lives put on display in the broad light of day,
those who pretend to be outraged by those who sing out resignation in a borrowed tongue,
those who carry the discomfort of defeat in half-smiles stained by underlying rage,
those who clown around in hard hats too heavy for their bird-like heads,
those whose hands lift into the air as if separate from their bodies, as if sketching into thin air the thoughts they hope will one day be written in indelible ink,
those who carry their children like slumbering rivers, living poetry, acts of faith through the soundproof, overheated corridors of modern buildings,
those who apologize profusely before slipping away into the subdued obscurity of an unavoidable solitude from which there is no escape,
they, too, will see heaven;
those who sob in public, immodestly displaying their
poverty and their rebellion,

those who walk in anger, with methodical steps, under
drab coats along cold, grey beaches,

those who hold onto the fervent hope that one day
grey they will find the objects they thought lost and buried

forever in mud-soaked marshes,

those who mutter under their breath, wondering

whether they have said what should have been said and

whether they have been understood as though, once again,

they are using a grimy sponger to wipe clean the constant,
dreary hum that covers their voices,

those who play,

those who laugh,

those who read,

they, too, yes, they are promised heaven;

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**Herménégilde Chiasson** is one of Canada’s most accomplished writer-artists. He is the author of more than twenty books of poetry, over thirty plays, and several collections of essays. A multi-disciplinary artist, he has received numerous awards for his work, including the Governor General’s Award for poetry, the Molson Prize, le prix France-Acadie, le Grand prix de la francophonie canadienne, the prestigious Chevalier de l’ordre des Arts et des Lettres, and the Prix littéraire Antonine-Maillet-Acadie Vie. From 2003 to 2009, he served as Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick.

**Jo-Anne Elder** has translated many of Chiasson’s works of poetry, including Beatitudes and Conversations and, in collaboration with Fred Cogswell, Climates. She and Fred Cogswell also edited and translated Unfinished Dreams: Contemporary Poetry of Acadie.