

An Attitude of Beatitude

Luke 6:17-26 by Patty Friesen (Feb. 17/19)

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus gives the beatitudes from a level place or a plain and thus in Luke, Luke 6 is called the Sermon on the Plain whereas in Matthew, it is the Sermon on the Mount. The four Beatitudes or Blessings reflect a way of life that is the upside down kingdom - where those who are poor belong to the kingdom and where those who hunger are filled and those who weep are given laughter, those who are persecuted are rewarded.

Central American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez says, God loves the poor, not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God's love." p. 145 Interpreter's Bible, Luke

The four woes are the flip side of the four blessings. Just as the beatitudes announce God's favour, which is an occasion for joy among the poor, so also the woes announce God's judgement which is a cause for remorse among the comfortable. These are tough cultural critical words from Jesus in Luke's Gospel that Matthew's Gospel sanitizes to blessed are the poor in spirit and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. But Luke lays it on thick and uses more woes than any other gospel. Luke is in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets that lay it on thick with regard to economic justice of those who struggle in this life, proclaiming that the reign of God is about a reversal of fortune - not just in the next life but in the present one.

Jesus' words are hard words to read because I am on the side of the rich and comfortable so where does that leave me and Jesus - with blessings or with woes? I don't even know what it is like to be poor and to live pay check to pay check. I am educated, white, living in a household with double income at the top of our pay scales with no kids and mortgages nearly paid off and the possibility of early retirement. I used to be poor as a university student and eating Ramen noodles but that's quite awhile ago and now I eat a lot of meat.

If the poor are meant to rely on God and have to do so more out of a position of trust for daily bread, then as someone who has a freezer full of meat, I have to work harder to remember to trust God and to humble myself and learn from those who have to trust more. I like meeting people at Friendship Inn - it is an exercise in beatitudes, in witnessing God's love of people who trust God for daily bread and how I'm blessed by being part of the food prep there. How do we remember the poor and hungry? How do we keep these brothers and sisters in front of us? Not as charity cases but as people who remind us about the generosity of God, who have something to teach us about God. We do it through community engagement of course, through traveling to countries that are very different from ours, from working at Friendship Inn or going with Mennonite Disaster Service.

Also, we all can open our eyes through reading either memoirs of people who are different from us or from fiction by authors from various countries or life experiences. The memoirs of people like Ernie Louttit, a Metis Saskatoon policeman reveal to us what circumstances lead to people eating at Friendship Inn and sleeping at the Lighthouse in downtown Saskatoon. We rich white Mennonites have no clue what

these folks have been through but we are learning through Ernie's writings and through Maria Campell and Richard Wagamese and Thomas King's writings about the generational impact of colonialism and racism and hopeful ideas for our future together as indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

My testimony of life-changing reading began with reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and other books about the Holocaust in high school and having my innocent world rocked by the evils to which humanity would stoop to scapegoat other human beings. Reading can wreck your innocence and ignorance. From there, Canadian Mennonite University made me read Maria Campbell, a Saskatchewan Metis writer which was a completely eye-opening experience of people I grew up around and had no clue about. Seminary exposed me to Christian feminists like Elizabeth Schossler Fierenza who were helping us see the many faces of God in scripture and the world. At seminary, I read Mel White, a gay Christian writer who opened my eyes to these changes in the church.

Lately, the reading that is opening my eyes is around climate change. Reading Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben will keep a person awake at night. And in my 50's, I find myself going back to books that were significant at other stages in my life but that are meaningful to me as I blow the dust off them and re-read Annie Dillard's poetic reflections on nature and Edwin Friedman's reflections on family healing. I believe God sends us the books we need at the right time - that has happened too often to me to count so I strongly believe reading is one of the ways the Holy Spirit wants to speak to us and open our eyes and build empathy and understanding.

Books have the power to transform individuals and societies. The invention of the printing press in the 1600's allowed people to read other's ideas that lead to the religious Reformation of Europe and the rise of Anabaptism. I love it that our religious heritage began with the scripture being translated from Latin into German and then English. Our faith was changed by having scripture we could read and understand and think about. There have been numerous translations since the Vulgate, the first Catholic Latin translation to English in 1770. There was the King James Version - commissioned by the king and in his version, he included in the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 5 - thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The Catholics don't pray that part of the Lord's Prayer because it wasn't in the original Latin version.

I grew up on the Good News Bible with it's illustrated passages and then the New International Version. At seminary 30 years ago we were introduced to The New Revised Standard Version as the most accurate and inclusive version, using brothers and sisters. I've noticed these past couple of years that NRSV may have included women in their people references but has had all male references for God as Father, King and Lord. I've personally had a yearning for the God of Psalm _____ who comforts us as a weaned child at her mother's breast. In my personal prayer life, I have icons, ancient prayerful paintings of women that help me imagine the mothering aspects of God as I pray. Occasionally when I've typed scripture for the bulletin I have simply replaced the pronoun he with the word God and no one has noticed:). At our annual meeting, worship committee brought forward The Inclusive Version Bible translated by the Priests for Equality who use the ancient Hebrew name Yahweh with the Hebrew

letters YHWH without the vowels because the name was too holy to write out completely. This YHWH may be also awkward for us despite it's translation accuracy but other pronouns for God have been changed from third person he to second person you which is more prayerful and poetic, I think.

We've been using it for a couple of weeks now so please share your reflections with the worship committee and pastors. For me personally, I find this version refreshing and engaging, which was what scripture is always meant to be. Our hope is to elevate scripture in its' importance as God's word for instruction and attitude changer. As another way of elevating scripture we've incorporated our response to the Scripture reading like they use at Canadian Mennonite University: For the Word of God in Scripture, for the Word of God among us, For the Word of God within us, Thanks be to God!

Our attitudes and beatitudes will change by having other books transform us. Books are more than escape or intellectual conquest. With the right postures of openness, attentiveness and reflection, they will change our hearts and minds. What are you reading now and how is it shaping you?

Before I left for Canadian Mennonite University last week, Ruth Buhler called me and said these golden words, "when you are at Commonword bookstore, buy whatever you think the church library needs." That's like letting a kid loose in a candy shop. So this is what I bought with church money and it naturally reflects some of my reading interests but I make a case for these books to shape us as a congregation. #1 Since I was attending a conference on death and the deaths of our loved ones continue to impact us for years - there is no such thing as closure we learned at our death

conference, I've bought Paula D'Arcy's *Winter of the Heart: Finding Your Way through the Mystery of Grief*. I also bought the Mennonite Historical Society book launch of *Sketches from Siberia* about Jacob Suderman, a Mennonite artist exiled to Siberia and how he continued to draw and document in Siberia until all he had left to work with was a nub of a pencil and poor paper. I also bought *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* even though it has a new cover, I believe we need to keep working with the insides of it. I bought *The Art of Loading Brush* by Wendell Berry because he is a farmer and writes with such love of the land, that he is the most authentic of our environmental writers. I bought *Generous Spaciousness: responding to Gay Christians in the Church* because I think these are still important testimonials of our brothers and sisters. And finally, Ruth told me to get some Amish romance so I questioned that one but I guess it is safe Christian escape to read about handsome Amos Zuercher hitching his horses. Not all reading changes our lives!

Beatitudes for Readers: Blessed are you who read, for the world will be opened to you. Blessed are you who love fiction and memoir and non-fiction because you'll learn more about other people and about yourself. Blessed are you when people call you bookworms and nerds and say you are wasting your time and don't you have anything better to do - rejoice and be glad for great will be your reward in a blessed life comforted and led by the companions of writers who have gone before you. Amen.