

Invitation to Soar

We are about to enter the beautiful and dangerous world of the Sermon on the Mount. If you experience this world as an obligation to be met or a burden to be carried, it will crush you. But if you experience it as an invitation to soar, it will set your heart on fire with joy.

At the heart of the Sermon on the Mount is the prayer. We call it The Lord's Prayer or The Our Father. It is the prayer of the Church worldwide. Billions of people pray that prayer every Sunday, and millions offer it to God everyday. In the Gospel of Matthew story after story, beatitude after beatitude, command after command, miracle after miracle, conflict after conflict return to this prayer like the swallows return each spring to Mission San Juan Capistrano.

At the heart of the prayer is the petition: **Thy kingdom come.** This petition is a longing for the "one far off, divine event toward which the whole creation moves," when, as Paul says in Ephesians, God will **bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.** (Ephesians 1:10) This petition is a longing for the relationships of heaven to be replicated in the relationships of earth. The community that gathers around Jesus prays for that day to come and is learning here and now to do God's will on earth, as it is done in the relationships of heaven.

Learning to live like that takes place within a creative tension between desire and depletion. Jesus invites His community into this tension and fuels our desire for God when He mandates the central action in the Sermon on the Mount: **"Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness."** (Matthew 6:33) We could paraphrase Jesus' invitation by saying: "Place your life under God's authority and learn to make His priorities your priorities." The Sermon on the Mount presents the priorities of God in clear, piercing, and breath-taking ways. Jesus' mandate gives feet to our faith that the kingdom is coming to earth some day and is making its presence felt right now in a neighborhood near you.

Jesus invites us into what Boris Pasternak called "This glorious holiday, this liberation from the curse of mediocrity, this soaring flight above the dullness of a humdrum existence." (Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, 122-123) It's out there. It beckons to us. Jesus says, "Seek it! Long for it! Make it your life's ambition to find it! Leave no stone unturned until you soar!"

We see in the Gospels what can happen when people accept His invitation. Jesus summoned James the son of Zebedee and John, his brother, to follow Him while they were dockside mending their nets, **and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.** (Mark 1:20) Peter once said to Jesus about all 12 disciples: **"We have left everything to follow you."** (Mark 10:28) Down through the centuries men and women have followed the wisdom of missionary Jim Elliot who affirmed the mandate to seek first the kingdom of God in these words: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." (Jim Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, 108)

The other side of the tension in the Sermon on the Mount is the depletion of human moral virtue and even of desire for God, as people try to practice on earth the relationships that hold sway in heaven. We see in the Gospels what happens when people are depleted. Simon Peter said to Jesus, **Get away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!**" (Luke 5:8) A Roman centurion said to Jesus, **"Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof."** (Matthew 8:8) In his darkest moment Peter remembered Jesus' prediction of his cowardice, **and he broke down and wept.** (Mark 14:72)

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Jesus invites us to expect and to welcome this moral depletion. He built failure into His invitation to soar. He said, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 5:3) We could paraphrase the first Beatitude by saying: “When you reach the end of your rope and realize with remorse that you want nothing more to do with God’s priorities, it is in that moment that God’s favor shines on you, and He has something good for you you don’t deserve and don’t expect.”

However, that awful moment, when we see how morally impoverished we really are, how little we care about other people – that moment is precisely the moment we want to give up. “Seek the kingdom of God? I don’t think so. It’s impossible. That’s not the real world. Count me out! Don’t trouble me with cockamamie, do-good foolishness. You’re wasting my time.”

But that moment, that awful moment, when people see how morally impoverished they are, is a moment of beatitude. It is a moment of liberation from self-righteousness and self-deception. You are never closer to God than when you feel farthest from God. You see that in stories that Christians told each other in the early Church.

They told the story about a Pharisee who prayed, **“God, I thank you that I am not like all other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This man went home justified before God.** (Luke 16:11-14)

They told the story of the outcast woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. People berated Jesus for letting a sinful woman like her even touch Him. Jesus turned their world upside down when He said, **“He who has been forgiven little loves little”** – the implication being that whoever is forgiven much loves much, like the outcast woman. (See Luke 7:36-50)

So, don’t you run when your moral poverty overtakes you like your worst fear? Don’t run from God, don’t run from the Church, and don’t run from the clarity of your moral impoverishment. Accept it! Acknowledge it! Embrace the blessing of God that Jesus promised to the poor in spirit. God’s beatitude will restore you.

You will be able to accept again the invitation to **“seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness.”** But you will be more sober-minded this time about your moral strength, more teachable, more willing to seek help from your fellow believers in Jesus. In your spiritual poverty you have learned that whoever is forgiven much loves much, and people who love much do the unpredictable. Love turns unlikely disciples into extravagant disciples. Let this be, O Lord, a congregation honeycombed with people, who are stricken with their moral poverty and stricken with the love of Christ, and this congregation will stand firm in the coming storm.

Love Your Enemy

Now, come, taste heaven on earth for a minute, and soar if you can. Jesus said, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ The Old Testament never actually uses the words, ‘Hate your enemy.’ But it does say: Break their teeth in their mouths, O God ... Let them vanish like water that flows away ... Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see**

the sun ... The righteous will be glad when they are avenged. (Psalm 58:6-10) It does say: **“Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.”** (1 Samuel 15:3)

Jesus was having none of it. In a word that might well have brought the earth to a grinding halt on its axis He said, **“But I tell you: Love your enemies.”** The enemy is the person who harms you and the people you love. It’s the person that disrespects you, undercuts you, and slanders you. The enemy can be very close. “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.” (G. K. Chesterton, http://www.notable-quotes.com/e/enemies_quotes.html)

Maybe Jesus is the first enemy we have to love. His dominical detonation in the center of our souls threatens to disrupt all our conventional wisdom about justice. Justice means that people get what’s coming to them; and if the guy who stabbed me in the back melts away like a slug on the sidewalk, then good! He deserved it. Everybody knows that. Everybody feels that way. Jesus doesn’t seem to care about that. He’s not just messing with your mind; He’s messing with the stable order of society. I mean: what does He want? Shall we abandon the use of force to fight crime?

“But I tell you: Love your enemies.” However calm we seem, our response within is visceral, not to say violent. It’s just not possible to love your enemies. I caution you again: If you experience this as an obligation to be met or a burden to be carried, it will crush you. But if you experience it as an invitation to soar “above the dullness of a humdrum existence,” it will set your heart on fire with joy. Is it hard? You bet! Will you fail? Of course! And so what?

Jesus is not calling on the state to abandon the use of force to fight crime. He steers us away from silly ideas like that. He is speaking to His people who pray for the relationships of heaven to be replicated in the relationships of earth. He is not asking them to change the status quo. He is asking them to be irritants in the status quo to remind the status quo that its days are numbered. The irritation is actual people, like us, who actually love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them.

And why should we do that? Jesus says, **“That you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”** The family likeness shows up on earth when followers of Jesus love their enemies. Jesus dials down a lot of the emotion He has generated with an example of how our Father in heaven loves His enemies. **“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”** (Matthew 5:45)

Jesus’ example is exquisite and down to earth. Sun and rain are so common that we take them for granted. God doesn’t shout at the unrighteous, “I love you.” He just does it, whether anyone notices or not. Isn’t that the best way to love your enemy? Don’t be obvious. Don’t even be seen. Just do it. Do something to bless the person, who is your enemy. Do it again and again, as regular as rain.

Jesus said over and over, **“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.”** (Mark 1:15) In other words, watch Jesus, and you will see what God’s authority looks like in human life. Watch Jesus, and you will see God’s priorities on display. And as we learn from Jesus’ command to love our enemies, God’s authority will contradict human authority, and His priorities will contradict our priorities.

Unlikely disciples become extravagant disciples as they allow themselves to be corrected by the Lord they follow. They learn sooner or later that His thoughts are not

their thoughts, and His ways are not their ways. They learn sooner or later that they are doing Him no favors by following Him. He is pouring out the new wine of heaven. It remains to be seen, if His disciples then and His disciples now are wineskins that can stretch and not split under the pressure of His expanding presence in their experience.

The One who uttered the Sermon on the Mount is here with us by means of the Gospel of Matthew. We hold in our hands the written revelation of Him who said to them and says to us, “Watch me, and you will see what God is like. God is with you. Don’t miss Him!”

We won’t miss Him, if we keep in step with the Holy Spirit. We keep in step with the Spirit, when we, poor in spirit, **seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.** There are many ways to do that. Let’s talk about one. **Love your enemies.** This week, pray for the person you truly dislike. Look for ways to do something good for that person. The person may never know you did it. It doesn’t matter. Just do it, and do it again ... and again, and you will be like our Father in heaven.