

Some you have asked how my trip to see my Dad went. It was good to visit him and along with my sister to plan for his future care. My Dad is 89 years old but still we continue to learn more details about his life. I knew that Dad’s father died of cancer when he was six years old and that for a couple of years before his death, my grandmother was devoted to his care. But on my recent visit my sister shared with me that she’d talked to my Dad more about how he felt as a six year old boy at his father’s funeral. After a long pause, Dad said: “I felt utterly and completely alone.” For the year that followed, his mother apparently fell completely apart. She and my father moved in with relatives where they stayed for a year until she could emotionally recover. Then they moved to a nearby house in the rural community where she raised my father. Most of Dad’s childhood was during the Great Depression, and fortunately, for my dad and grandmother they had been left with a \$10,000 life insurance policy, which meant they had more money than most of the people living around them. Grandmother doted on her only child and dressed him in fine and almost frilly clothing. Dad was teased for this at school and also teased because he was smart and made good grades. There’s an “almost family secret” (only alluded to) that this teasing resulted in some form of abuse. And so my Dad grew up feeling “utterly and completely alone” and with fears that haunted him all his life. This gave my Dad great empathy for those who suffered or felt isolated. It drew him into the ministry to help others. It also meant he lived with a lot of fear causing him to withdraw from the world rather than engage it. His fears were sometimes projected onto his family and resulted in a strict code of conduct intended on keeping his loved ones safe. All these feelings and experiences created his life’s vision of the world.

Visions of how we view our world are very important. Our bulletin theme is “The Vision Beautiful.” Today’s gospel text describes God’s “vision beautiful.” We know it as The Beatitudes. Sometimes people think of them as almost parallel to the 10 commandments, as instructions on proper behavior. But Jesus, the master teacher, knew that a vision was much more powerful than any list of precepts. He’s speaking the radical difference between the way the people experienced their world and the vision of the Kingdom of God. He uses this word “blessed” which in classical Greek literature means those who are “god-like in their happiness.” The people knowing this classical meaning would have heard Jesus say that “you, who are poor, who mourn, the meek, those thirsting for righteousness are ‘happy like the gods.’ You rise above ordinary human existence!” Sounds kind of crazy! Jesus describes a world that is turned upside down. It a world of contradiction — but then God’s kingdom is frequently a contradiction to the status quo.

A few details are noteworthy. The word translated “meek” does not mean an impoverished, shy servant but rather a tamed lion — powerful but restrained in the use of power. This word for “meek” was used to describe the great prophet, Moses, who was no wall-flower. So the meek are those who are wise and careful in how they use power. In verse 7, the word used for *mercy* is also the word for *compassion*. The merciful are those who offer compassion. In verse 8, the “*pure in heart*” is a reference to the purity laws of Jesus’ day. These purity laws kept the poor, the sick, the lame, and the women away from the holy of holies. Only the purest of the pure could get close to God. Jesus reverses this law, saying it’s not the physically pure, but the pure of heart who see God. Verses 11 and 12 that talk of persecution would have particularly touched the hearts of Matthew’s church who now experienced the threat and throes of minority persecution. God’s vision is the opposite of what people see and experience all around them. It is a “vision beautiful.”

For those who heard his words, Jesus vision presented radical possibilities. They were folks with little hope that their world could be very much different. It was good news for them to imagine more to life than living out the drudgery of their days. Jesus gave them hope.

How can these words of Jesus jolt *us* to be open to the radical possibilities of God’s grace? It takes imagination. Week before last I attended a clergy day-retreat in San Marino led by Rev. June Goudey. She offered these signs of a lively imagination as well as signs of a fear-constricted imagination.

These are signs of a lively imagination:

- ~ spontaneity
- ~ flexibility
- ~ generosity
- ~ creativity
- ~ openness to the new
- ~ ability to transcend contexts
- ~ hopefulness
- ~ God is still speaking

These are signs of a fear-constricted imagination

- ~ distrust of others
- ~ unintended cruelty
- ~ single-minded attitudes
- ~ reliance on old and often outdated categories of thought
- ~ unrealized potential

We've heard examples of what happens when imagination is stifled; when people no longer are allowed to think creatively. They drink the Kool-Aid; they live out someone else's vision. As I bring my imagination to these beatitudes, here are a few of my thoughts:

First, there's something to be said for spending time in the mountains. Jesus went up the mountain and was able to illuminate God's "vision beautiful." Nature helps break open our senses of imagination. Second, we learn what the kingdom of heaven is like from unlikely sources--what others might label "poor in spirit." Those who are vulnerable lead us to heavenly heights, such as the children. During choir rehearsal last week, Seth was playing in my office, and as he played, he said, "I just love Jesus." In the innocence of his words was an openness of heart to receive that which is divine and holy without fear or pretense. And those who might place labels of "poor in spirit or intellect" are folks who have never heard Melissa lead us in the closing benediction. She draws us to heights of heavenly joy.

Third, to journey with those who mourn is a sacred task. We mourn all kinds of losses (not just death). To mourn one's loss of memory or the loss of physical ability or well-being is a sacred journey of loss that brings one close to the very heart of God. Fourth, God's kingdom is a realm that honors the seekers and those with questions, those who hunger and thirst to know God. These are people who are seeking to align themselves with the purposes of the Creator. Fifth, compassion is the centerpiece of the vision of God's universe. There are four "blessings" before *mercy* which is compassion, and four blessings following *mercy*. To be compassionate is to know unequivocally the vision of God.

Sixth, purity of heart has nothing to do with the ritual cleanliness required before entering the temple of God's presence; purity of heart is the spiritual opening of one's heart to the Divine. Seventh, peacemakers are so near to God's way of being that they are God's children, begotten by a God who loves peace. And finally, being blessed is not dependent on the opinions of others. True prophets were not popular because they said things the people didn't want to hear. Jesus was not popular with those who had social and religious power. There is a vision beautiful for which it is worth taking a stand, even dying for. In death is resurrection.

Visions of possibility allow for resurrection. In Tunisia the terrible vision of a young educated man selling fruit and living in such despair that he sets himself on fire inspires people to say this must not be the only possibility. And the people rise up and reject the powers and principalities of this world for a new and liberating political future. Then the vision of Tunisia's revolution inspires Egypt to say, enough is enough. This illustrates the importance of vision. The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims is a radical, turn the world upside down vision, that is the *Vision Beautiful* – because it is the vision of the Creator, and that vision calls us to set free our imaginations so that we may truly know and believe and live our lives for *God's Vision Beautiful*.