

## The Beatitudes 5-8

These reflections were developed by two Secular Franciscans in the Atlantic area of the Regional Fraternity of Eastern Canada, Doug Hagen and Sherrill Guimond. In a shorter form, they were presented at an Area meeting, and then, these texts became the basis for one of the retreats hosted by St. Francis of Assisi Fraternity, Cornwall, PEI.

We are using the version of the Beatitudes found in Matt 5:1-12.

### **Fifth Beatitude: Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.**

The story of a mother who approached Napoleon for a pardon for her son. Napoleon replied that the young man had twice committed a certain crime and that for justice to be done, the man deserved to die. "But I don't ask for justice," said the mother, "I plead for mercy." "But your son does not deserve mercy," said Napoleon. "It would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all that I ask for him," replied the mother.

Mercy is a gift given to those who do not deserve it. We often hear of this in a legal setting after a person has been convicted and guilt has been assigned. When the sentence is about to be handed down, it is mercy that is sought, not innocence. At this point, your only hope is mercy; mercy that you don't get what you deserve.

By the same token, we must not confuse mercy with emotionalism. If we see a TV commercial about starving kids and we weep and want to help, this does not mean we are merciful. We can be emotional without being merciful.

People sometimes do good things not out of a heart of mercy, but for selfish reasons, e.g. tax write-offs, to look good for their own sense of well-being, politicians – photo-op at Food Bank. Paul writes in Corinthians 13:3: "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

Those who hunger and thirst for justice may lose sight of the fact that we are all sinful and weak. Maybe Jesus placed this beatitude here to act as a balance. He tells us that justice must be tempered by mercy. Even as we struggle for justice, we need to love and forgive. Mercy leads to concern for the wrong doer as well as for the wrong that is being done.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to be merciful to others, without knowing one's own need for mercy from God. It is from the sense of helplessness in the face of sin that one calls out to God for mercy.

Jesus lets us see this Beatitude in action in the parable of the good Samaritan. The Samaritan does not question why this man is lying on the roadside. He does not inquire into the man's past. He is not concerned whether the injured man is a good person or whether he has the same religious beliefs or political convictions. The Samaritan sees only one thing. Here is a person in trouble who needs help and he gives it generously.

It is said of St. Francis that he never questioned anyone who was seeking alms or help to ascertain their need. He simply gave.

We have all been injured and I am sure we may have injured. Parents have been hurt by things children said or did. These are past. We learn to move on.

If we look back on the beatitudes from poverty of spirit to mourning to meekness to hungering and thirsting for righteousness, how does this lead up to the beatitude of mercy? As Sherrill has said; one of the dangers of living a righteous life is that self-righteousness is always just a breath away. It is very easy for me to list the sins I haven't committed, and to catalogue sins of others, to fill pages with my good deeds. Remember the two people that Christ describes in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector? Compare the words and actions of the two. The tax collector's action is a seed of the Jesus prayer; "Lord Jesus Christ .....

Christ is constantly ready to be merciful to anyone because He is mercy itself. Each time we recite the "Our Father", we ask for the same measure of mercy from God that we show to others.....

To paraphrase St. Theresa of Avila: "Christ has no body on earth but ours; no hands but ours; no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Ours are the feet through which He is to go about doing good. Ours are the hands through which He is to bless people now."

Remember when St. Francis hugged the leper?

Who are the lepers in the twenty-first century?

Justice, courage, self-control and wisdom were prominent virtues in Jesus' day but not mercy. The world of Jesus' day was a world without mercy, a cruel world in which the poor were crushed, the innocent silenced, little children brutally murdered or callously abandoned, in which the chief amusement and sport was the amphitheatre where men fought to the death. The ancient world was a world without mercy. The Romans despised pity, the Stoics looked upon mercy with suspicion, the Pharisees harboured little mercy in their hearts.

Against that background, the fifth Beatitude was revolutionary because it introduced a virtue foreign to everyday life. God's people are motivated to show mercy by the mercy they themselves have been shown by God. Being merciful to others is the natural result of receiving the mercy of God – and provides evidence that we have received it. The key to becoming a merciful person is to become a broken person. You get the power to show mercy from the real feeling in your heart that you owe everything you are and everything you have to sheer divine mercy. Father William J. Bausch is in his book "Storytelling Imagination and Faith" tells the following story: once a very bad man died and went before the judgment throne. Before him stood Abraham, David, Peter and Luke. A chilly silence hung heavy in the room as an unseen voice began to read the details of the man's life. There was nothing good that was recorded. When the voice concluded, Abraham spoke: "Men like you cannot enter the heavenly kingdom. You must leave." "Father Abraham," the man cried, "I do not defend myself. I have no choice but to ask for mercy. Certainly you understand. Though you lied to save your own life, saying your wife was your sister, by the grace and mercy of God you became a blessing to all nations."

David interrupted, "Abraham has spoken correctly. You have committed evil and heinous crimes. You do not belong in the kingdom of light." The man faced the great king and cried, "Don of Jesse, it is true I am a wicked man. Yet I dare ask you for forgiveness. You slept with

Uriah's wife and later, to cover your sin, arranged his death. I ask only forgiveness as you have known it."

Peter was next to speak. "Unlike David, you have shown no love to God. By your acid tongue and your vile temper you have wounded the Son of God." "I should be silent." The man muttered. "The only way I have used the blessed name of Jesus is in anger. Still, Simon, son of John, I plead for grace. Though you walked by his side and listened to words from his own lips, you slept when he needed you in the garden, and you denied him three times in his night of greatest need."

Then Luke the evangelist spoke, "You must leave. You have not been found worthy of the Kingdom of God.

The man's head bowed sadly for a moment before a spark lit in his face. "My life has been recorded correctly." The man began slowly. "I am guilty as charged. Yet I know there is a place for me in the blessed kingdom. Abraham, David and Peter will plead my cause because they know of the weakness of man and the mercy of God. You, blessed physician, will open the gates to me because you have written of God's great love for the likes of me. Don't you recognize me? I am the lost sheep that the Good Shepherd carried home. I am your younger, prodigal brother."

And the gates opened and Luke embraced the sinner.

A day or so after his election, Pope Francis spoke during the Angelus. He stressed God's capacity to forgive. The themes were the woman at the well and the prodigal son. He said that mercy is the Lord's most powerful message. Also, that is not easy to trust oneself to the mercy of God because God's mercy is such an unfathomable abyss – but we must do it. He advised us to ask for the grace of never tiring to ask for God's mercy because God never tires of pardoning.

It can be hard to fully understand the beatitudes; they are only one line each! So that's why we use other passages to help us understand them. The parable of the unmerciful servant is an illustration of what it means to be truly merciful, and of what our motivation for being merciful should be. Jesus tells us the parable in response to Peter's question in Vs. 21 as to how many times he should forgive his brother. By suggesting 7 times, Peter feels he is being more than generous, and is really justifying himself and seeking to feed his ego. Religious leaders taught a limit on forgiveness and mercy, but Jesus has other ideas – Vs. 22 suggests a radical view of mercy that was as upside-down as what has gone before it.

Mercy is not a quality we expect to see much these days. Instead, our eyes, ears and emotions are assaulted daily even hourly in the case of radio and TV news items, by bigotry, scams, prejudice and intolerance. Acts of mercy are so rare that, when they do occur, they make headline news, replete with pictures, in newspapers and magazines and on television. This is not to say that mercy is not admired. It indeed is, which accounts for it making headlines when the media hear of it happening. Though people admire the merciful and wish they were more like them, they rarely take the opportunity to express mercy when such a chance arises.

The Pharisees, harsh in their self-righteous judgments of others, showed little mercy. Jesus saying of them in Matthew 23:23, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice

and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the other undone.” This difference makes apparent how far apart God and men are on the value we should place upon specific qualities of character.

We need to remind ourselves from time to time that the Beatitudes represent signs of those who are truly Christ’s disciples. They help identify those upon whom God’s blessings rest to aid them in living joyfully. From another angle, they describe the nature of true happiness.

The truly merciful are too aware of their own sins to deal with others in sharp condemnation, so they constrain themselves to deal humbly and kindly with those in need. Nothing moves us to forgive others like the amazing realization that God has forgiven our sins. Mercy in God’s children begins by experiencing His forgiveness of the, and perhaps nothing proves more convincingly that we have been forgiven than our readiness to forgive.

A merciful person demonstrates three characteristics: 1. A merciful person is understanding. Too often we condemn and find fault with others without having all the facts. We need to get all the facts about another person before we pass judgment on them. When we learn to do that, we will become less judgmental and more understanding and patient towards the people in our lives. 2. A merciful person is loving. The parable of the Good Samaritan presents three philosophies of life: the philosophy of the thieves who attacked and robbed the man, leaving him beside the road half dead, was “beat them up”, philosophy of the priest and Levite who passed by the wounded man was “pass them up”, but, the philosophy of the Good Samaritan was “lift them up.” We must ask God to baptize us with the “Spirit of Mercifulness” so that like Him, we may go about doing good instead of going about. The merciful person is a loving person who demonstrates this concern by deeds and not by words only. 3. A merciful person is forgiving. A story is told of E. Stanley Jones which beautifully describes mercy. In Foo Chow are three graves side by side. Two are the graves of Nellie and Topsy Saunders, the daughters of a widow in Melbourne, Australia. Those two women went out as missionaries to Fuh-Kien, China, and both were murdered. In 1895, when the news of their death reached their mother in Australia, she was 62 years old. What do you think she did?

Of course, she was filled with grief at the loss of her two daughters. But she didn’t turn against God. She didn’t become bitter, resentful or cynical. She sold all that she had. She went to the place where her daughters had been murdered. She learned the Chinese language, set up a school and gave the remaining 20 years of her life to teaching the people who had murdered her daughters about God’s love and mercy. Who was better qualified to teach it than she, for she practiced what she preached. She died at 82 and was buried beside her two daughters. The merciful person is a forgiving person.

As stated earlier, each of the Beatitudes contains a promise. The promise contained in this fifth Beatitude is that the merciful shall receive mercy, because they are capable of receiving it. The unmerciful make receiving mercy an impossibility.

### **Sixth Beatitude – Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**

Those who are pure of heart are single-hearted, undivided in their loyalties, without fakery or pretense. They put on the mind and heart of God, looking on others with the eyes of Jesus, accepting them as brothers and sisters, persons of incomparable inner beauty and worth. The

pure of heart know what is really important - closeness to the Lord who alone can satisfy their inner longings for love and understanding. The pure of heart will not allow anything - wealth, fame, various pastimes, job, academic achievement, or the opinion of others - sway them from what is really important, seeing God in others and responding to them as other Christs.

St. Francis tells us in his Letter to the Faithful: "... love God, therefore, and adore Him with a pure heart and a pure mind, because He Who seeks this above all things has said: True adorers adore the Father in Spirit and Truth."

Sister Helen Swift tells us in her book, "How Blest You Are" that In ordinary conversation when we say a substance is pure, we mean that it is everything it is meant to be. Absent are other substances that might lessen its quality. Pure implies wholesomeness not polluted by any harmful or even inferior ingredient. The message of Jesus is that it tells us that our hearts were made for God. It has a single purpose, one desire. It is a heart uncluttered with anything that can lead it away from God. Jesus says that all those with God-centered hearts will see God. Sister Helen tells us that we think of the heart as the source of human emotions, but the Jews thought of the heart as the source of life, the centre of thought and will. It is the heart that turns to God in repentance. It is the heart that loves God above all things; that longs for his will to be done.

Becoming God-centered depends first of all on being attentive to the words of God. The heart which has heard God's Word keeps the focus on God and refuses entry to anything that would turn it aside.(pg. 61)

Sister Swift also tells us that the pure of heart pray to know God's will so that they may faithfully follow it. Discerning God's will is a daily obligation. In order to be in tune with God's will we need daily prayer and an awareness of what is happening in our own heart. We must listen in prayer. We must not use the whole time of prayer chattering to God, but give God a chance to reveal himself to us. We must have a listening heart and be willing to wait. If we listen and wait we will recognize God in the desires he places in our hearts, in the circumstances we find in our lives, in the voices of other people, in the urgings to help another, in the movement toward greater truth, love and reconciliation. Each choice is one small step toward God. The person focused on God is ready to hear and reply. (pg. 62-63)

Jesus promised that those who are pure of heart will see God. Because of the Spirit within us, we can see God and his activity in the people around us. Some people look at their neighbour and see faults, defects and evil. The pure of heart see the goodness of God reflected in those around them. As one lives out this Beatitude, God becomes visible in all his creation. (pg. 65)

So what is a pure heart? It is a heart free of possessiveness, a heart able to mourn, a heart that thirsts for what is right, a heart that is merciful, a heart that doesn't look at people merely as bodies or labels or objects to be used. A pure heart reaches out to embrace every person and every creature it encounters because a pure heart sees the handiwork of the Creator in everything. To see God's hand in everything – we need to be at peace with all creation. Hebrews 12:14 tells us, "pursue peace with everyone and the holiness, without which, no one will see the Lord."

Jean Vanier in his book "Living Gently in a Violent World", speaks about possessing a pure heart in this way: "... maybe we will change the world if we are happy. Maybe what we need most is to rejoice and to celebrate with the weak and the vulnerable. Maybe the most important

thing is to learn how to build communities of celebration. Maybe the world will be transformed when we learn to have fun together. I don't mean to suggest that we don't talk about serious things. But maybe what our world needs more than anything is communities where we celebrate life together and become a sign of hope for our world." (taken from an on-line sermon dated Nov.20, 2011, given by Rev. Dr. Thomas Aldworth at the Morgan Baptist Church)

Francis lived this Beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God". His only desire was to say "Our Father who art in Heaven ... " and the only thing that occupied Francis' heart was doing God's will.

Fr. Fernanda Ventura in his dossier on "Evangelized to Evangelize" writes about how the heart that seeks to adjust its pace to the rhythm of God's heart will find its balance and will be able to recover its original purity. Those who "see God" are really those who are able to see the other... because God is not in any way in the distant heaven, but in the here and now. David N. MacNaughton, in his book "The Beatitudes", tells us that only as wickedness, hatred, vengeance and prejudice are removed from the human heart and replaced with unselfishness, love, trust and respect, can we ever hope to see God and live in peace. A person who is pure in heart manifests three characteristics: sincerity, simplicity and surrender. Sincere people are honest and true in their actions. A person pure in heart is simple in their approach and attitude and finally, the person pure in heart surrenders themselves to Jesus Christ and makes Jesus' will their own. (pg.44-45)

For Jesus, reference to the heart was not the body organ, but your truest self. The heart is the part of you that feels, delights, grieves, and desires. The heart is our imagination, the place inside where we conceive, the place where we dream. The heart is the sphere where we meet God, or avoid meeting God. The pure heart is a heart that has been emptied of what is unclean and purged of what no longer belongs.

Thomas Merton wrote that "purity of heart" ...means the renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacities, in order to obey God's will as it comes to us in the difficult demands of life in its exacting truth. (Contemplative Prayer – pg. 68)

A pure heart is a heart free of possessiveness, a heart capable of mourning, a heart that thirsts for what is right, a merciful heart, a loving heart, an undivided heart. Opposing the purity of heart is lust of any kind – for wealth, for recognition, for power, for vengeance, for sexual access to others – whether indulged through action or imagination. Purification of the heart is the endless struggle of seeking a more God-centered life. It is the minute to minute discipline of trying to be so aware of God's presence that the heart has no space for our own worries, ambitions, or attention to appearances. Prayer is essential to this endeavor. And it includes all we do in order to turn our attention toward God. A pure heart is a heart full of compassion for the whole of created nature....a heart which burns for all creation, for the birds, for the beasts, for every creature.

The stories of the Desert Fathers are full of accounts of monks whose hardest combat was to overcome the hardness of heart that led them to judge and condemn others. There is the story of two Egyptian monks who happened to come upon a woman stranded on one side of a stream too deep for her to cross. One of the monks picked her up and carried her safely to the other side - an action that scandalized the other monk. Finally, after walking a long distance in silence, he angrily chastised his brother for breaking the vow of chastity by touching a woman. The monk

replied, “I carried her across the river and put her down on the other side, but you are still carrying her.”

Fr. Michael Crosby, in his text, “Spirituality of the Beatitudes”, states that the “purity of heart described in this Beatitude, seems to characterize a kind of guilelessness and a wholeheartedness. Seeing God’s face depends on a purity of heart that represents a person’s total commitment to God’s plan. This inner dedication is manifested by doing good, by showing care.” (pg. 140)

Psalm 24 links the experience of seeing God’s face with purity of heart and righteous deeds, ”and who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts”. People whose hearts are centered on God reflect openness and generosity in the way they relate to each other.

Fr. Michael Crosby in his book, “Spirituality of the Beatitudes”, tells us that the process of coming to purity of heart demands that we move beyond our surface cares to be grounded in authentic care. This invites us to begin “looking” in a new way at ourselves, at others, and at God. When we consider our own lives and the life of our society, we can easily see how little genuine care they often reflect. Do I really care? Who and what do I care about? Only when I can see my lack of care – my lack of humanity – can I begin taking the first faltering steps toward a life of care. (pg.151-152)

Ron Rolheiser also poses the question: what is purity of heart? He tells us that to be pure of heart is to relate to others and the world in a way that respects and honors the full dignity, value, and destiny of every person and everything. To be pure of heart is to see others as God sees them. Purity of heart would have us loving others with their good (and not our own) in mind. Purity of heart is purity of intention and full respect in love. (on-line article “Chastity as Purity of Heart and intention dated jan 15, 2012)

### **Seventh Beatitude: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**

This Beatitude stresses the way a Christian should relate to others.

Jesus does not say “Blessed are the peaceful”, but “Blessed are the peacemakers.” It is one thing to possess an inner peace and to rejoice in it. It is quite another and a much greater challenge to strive to make peace possible for others.

Peace is much more than the absence of open conflict. However, solving a conflict is often the preliminary step to real peace. Estrangement between family members, alienation of people in the same parish community, hostility among co-workers all provide ample opportunity for the peacemaker.

While efforts to promote peace between individuals and small groups are important, we cannot ignore our responsibility for world peace. Given the level of nuclear arms, our very existence depends on it.

Rather than bemoaning the conflicts or becoming depressed, we can use our energies in a positive way. We can pray daily for world peace.

Jesus spent a great deal of time telling people that His Kingdom was not of this world. Many of the people who listened to this sermon expected a military kingdom. Jesus would defeat the Romans. In John, Ch. 6, after the great miracle that he had performed, it says that they would have made Him king (feeding of the 5,000).

But Jesus would be King of their hearts. His Kingdom would be in their hearts.

Some of the Beatitudes seem to highlight the inner attitudes of the disciple. Others stress the way we are to relate to others. This one is definitely in the second group.

Something else that Christ did not say was: “Blessed are those who prefer peace, wish for peace, await peace, love peace or praise peace.” His blessing is on the makers of peace. A peacemaker bridges the gap that separates people from one another and reunites them through love and friendship.

- A peacemaker is compassionate. Orphanages in war-torn countries have children who are dying, not so much from lack of food as from lack of love.
- A peacemaker is courageous – where there is darkness, the peacemaker is light. Where there is hate, the peacemaker is love. Where there is injustice, the peacemaker is justice.
  - Bishop Desmond Tutu, the black Anglican Bishop of South Africa and winner of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, is such a man. He courageously risked arrest for treason by calling on the international community to apply sanctions against the white minority government of South Africa in the hope that this action might lead them to change their dehumanizing treatment of blacks. It took the courageous touch of the peacemaker to establish justice in the land.
- A peacemaker is caring.
  - Dr. David MacDonald, Canada’s former Famine Relief Co-ordinator in Africa, has been a caring peacemaker to the starving. He badgered governments into giving more money. He eliminated bureaucratic roadblocks. He eased the conflict between various aid groups by engineering plans agreeable and acceptable to all. It takes the caring touch of a peacemaker to challenge us to turn our caring into sharing.

The world slaps various labels on the peacemaker, not all of them complimentary. Peacemakers have been called sentimentalists, idealists, troublemakers, cowards, traitors, commies, black lovers and so on. But God calls them his children and the name God gives them is the only one that really matters or counts.

No Spirit has been more identified with the Beatitude of peacemaking than Francis of Assisi.

His life began to change course after a year long imprisonment following a battle with the neighbouring town of Perugia in 1202. At 20 years of age, he was lucky not to have been maimed or killed. He had imagined how glorious it would be to be a man of arms. He was attractive, ambitious, popular and a walking billboard for his father’s work.

Then he saw the reality of war. He saw beautiful faces turned into hideous masks, same minds twisted into madness. We all know the conversion that took place.

Francis only lived to see his early 40's but in his short life he let us with a treasure chest of stories about what can happen when one tries with every fibre of his being to live the peace of Christ in the face of the world's violence.

Sister Rosemary Lynch, a Franciscan sister and peacemaker says: "Even if nuclear bombs were abolished, unless we defuse the bomb in our own hearts, the human family is quite capable of finding other, even worse means of destroying life."

In Admonition #27, Francis speaks of charity, wisdom and peace. He encountered the God of peace in the crucified Christ because he encountered the God of compassionate love. Love that is given, received and shared requires a community of people who are united in love. The Admonition also talks of poverty and joy. Francis lived in poverty so that he could overcome his violent self and become a loving person. He recognized his need for God and also that this spirit of love cannot take root in a heart that is possessed by other things, such as anger, hurt, jealousy or material possessions. Only a heart turned towards God could freely welcome the spirit of love and provide room within for peacemaking. So we are asked even, admonished, not so much to speak of Christ as to let Christ live in us so that people may find Him by seeing and feeling how He lives in us.

Father Benet Fonck writes that peace and all good is a marriage of the divine and the human. It is a statement of the ideals we are to take with us into the market places of the world. It stems from the awareness of the all-pervading presence of God, the soul of all goodness, sanctity, virtue, perfection. It is awareness that should inspire us at all times to give witness to Emmanuel, God with us; it is an awareness and witness to the goodness of God that we must have ourselves before we can communicate it to others.

#### Addendum

The word "Blessed" is used in the Beatitudes. Jim Forest says that there is no one word which will adequately describe the word, Blessed. It is something like "on the right path," and "on the way that the Creator want us to go." We Franciscans offer to each other the blessing "Pax et Bonum". – Peace and all good. We ask that God grant the grace and strength to be all that we can be, all that we are called to be, and have all of the grace that God wishes to bestow on each of us. The Blessing of St. Francis to his dear companion, Brother Leo, begins with the words: "May God bless you and keep you....." As I look around the people in this gathering, I can see that God already has and continues to do so. I know with all my heart that you are blessed. We are not perfect but the good news is that perfect is not on the list. The blessed know their need for God; they are sorry for their sins; they humbly ask for help; they want to do what is right; they help others; they are honest, and they make peace; and that, my dear, dear friends is you.

**Eighth Beatitude – 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.**

Since we are all God's children, it does seem silly to fight and quarrel and cause dissension. This only tears down the human family. Rather, we are called to side with the Prince of Peace, to work to settle disputes, to root out violence, to forgive and show compassion. We are to be those who unite, not those who divide; those who cooperate, not those who compete; those who build bridges, not those who erect walls. The Risen Lord says, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19). His followers must have this same message.

*Refer to ...second book of the Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano, pg.262, par.93)*

To stand up for what is right, especially in the face of mockery, rejection, and verbal and even physical abuse, is to stand with Jesus Christ and help him carry his cross. Jesus never promised us a rose garden; he did promise us eternal happiness united to the Blessed Trinity.

Sister Helen Swift tells us in her book, "How Blest You Are", that if we really take seriously what Jesus said in the first seven Beatitudes, the 8<sup>th</sup> Beatitude comes as no surprise. One has only to look at what happened to Jesus to know the results of living his message. Jesus is advising us that the one who lives the Beatitudes will be insulted, slandered and, in general, treated like the prophets of old. The disciple of today too must accept the fact that there is still a tie between living and preaching the Good News and suffering persecution.(pg. 75)

Sister Swift also tells us that Jesus is telling his disciples and us that the more we resemble him, the more that we will be treated just as he was treated. If we belonged to the world we would be accepted and praised but since we belong to Jesus, we can expect the same treatment he received. Somehow we find this very difficult to accept Jesus' answer. We keep looking for the rewards of goodness in this life, forgetting what happened to Jesus and so many of his true followers down through the centuries. Sister Swift tells us that Jesus knew how difficult it would be for us to realize the blessedness of being persecuted, so he gave us some practical examples. He showed how his disciples must live differently than those who have no faith. The person who tries to see persecution as an opportunity to be like Jesus and be more deeply inserted into the Kingdom is the person who sincerely lives the Beatitude. Jesus tells us we must pray for those who persecute us just as he did as he hung on the cross, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).(pg.77-78)

There is a real link between this last Beatitude and the message, "How blest are the peacemakers." To be a peacemaker implies taking action for the Kingdom, proclaiming the message of Jesus. Anyone who has tried to be true to this call of Jesus knows that it leads to persecution. Priests, sisters and lay leaders of Christian communities are arrested and tortured everyday because they proclaim the Good News of God's love. (pg. 79)

Jim Forrest, in his book, "The Ladder of the Beatitudes" asks do we believe that "this eighth beatitude is only for our ancestors or those living in countries where persecution continues?" (pg. 142) If we start noticing the image of God in the poor, if we begin to oppose those activities that cause suffering and bloodshed, no matter how meek and merciful you are, you may find that

getting into conflict can happen here and now. In this beatitude, Jesus assures us that getting into conflict for following him is something we should receive as a major blessing. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven..." (Mt 5:12)

Fr. Fernanda Ventura in his dossier on "Evangelized to Evangelize" writes that in this final beatitude we are faced with reality for one who bases their life on this set of principles – persecution, insult, lies, and slander will be their travelling companions.

David N. MacNaughton writes in his book, "The Beatitudes for Today" that Jesus has outlined the qualities each one of us must possess in order to be a Christian. A Christian must be humble, repentant, meek, righteous, merciful, pure and a peacemaker. Jesus tells us that when we display Christian virtues in our own lives, we can expect to receive the same kind of treatment that he received. (pg. 54-55)

Martin Luther said that, throughout the course of human history, 3 things have preserved and strengthened the Church and allowed her to witness mightily for Christ: teaching the Gospel faithfully, praying diligently and suffering with earnestness.

Trevor Huddleston, in his book, "Dying We Live", contains letters written by prisoners in German concentration camps awaiting death. Their testimony supports the truth contained in this 8<sup>th</sup> Beatitude, which is that God is never closer to us than when we suffer for him. One letter was from a 22 year old Canadian born in Saskatchewan who was shot by a firing squad. In his final letter to his mother he wrote: "I have travelled a road that I have never regretted...I am not old, I should not be dying ...the time is short, I cannot properly explain it, but my soul is perfectly at rest." (David MacNaughton's book – The Beatitudes, pg. 60-61)

James Howell tells us in his book, "The Beatitudes For Today" that "as we sort through what the Beatitudes mean for us today, we need to pause, take a deep breath, and reflect on the truth: if we absorb Jesus' words, if we walk in his way, if we try to embody his words and stick closely to him in the real world, we will suffer." And what Jesus invites us to see is that when we join him, we become people of hope. Hope dawns when we have discovered the pearl of great price, the one true path of life. (pg. 88)

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of this higher value of the truth when he marched on Selma in 1965, : "I can't promise you that it won't get you beaten or get your home bombed...but we must stand up for what is right...If you haven't discovered something that is worth dying for, you haven't found anything worth living for." (James Cone – Martyrdom Today, pg. 76)

The final beatitude is the longest. Christ singles out the prophets as models. The prophets classify sins against the poor as acts of disobedience to God, who does indeed regard us as responsible for each other. After Cain killed Abel, he said to

God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The implications of the story go beyond one person striking a deadly blow. Because I am my brother’s keeper, whatever I do or fail to do that contributes to the death of another makes me an accomplice in murder.

Fr. Michael Crosby tells us in his book, “Spirituality of the Beatitudes” that we live in a society today wherein affluence has choked off God’s word in such a way that Jesus’ promise of having foes within “one’s own household” seems all too evident. Persecution and misunderstanding are not to be expected only from members of one’s own family and former friends. It can be anticipated from society itself. Assured that this very persecution will be certain and a sign of God’s presence and reign with us, Fr. Crosby states that we have no need to worry how we should respond to such powers as we read in Matthew 10:19-20 “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time;” (pg. 178-179).

Isaiah 61:1 tells us: “the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me ... he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”

Richard Rohr tells us that in this text from Isaiah, the prophet describes the coming Servant of Yahweh. It is precisely this quote that Jesus first uses to announce the exact nature of his own ministry in Luke 4:18-19. In each case Jesus describes his work as reuniting things that have in any way lost their divine state, or been marginalized or demeaned by society. Rohr tells us that God justifies things “By restoring them to their true and full identity in Himself.” ( taken from Rohr’s “Related in the Spirit, posted online Dec, 16,2012 Richmond Mennonite Fellowship)

Matthew was trying to tell us that those who hunger and thirst to experience justice and to manifest it in a just lifestyle within a seriously unjust society must be open to the very real possibility of rejection and persecution. The world’s reaction to Jesus and his faithful commitment to live the Beatitudes will be the same response his disciples can expect ...” A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master...if they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!” (Mt 10: 24-25).

The eighth beatitude addresses the persecution that a Christian must endure in this life while following the example of Jesus. The life of the Christian may be a fulfilled and happy life; but it is no bed of roses either.

The following reflection by Mother Teresa shows up on the wall of Shishu Bhavan, a children’s home in Calcutta operated by the Sisters of Charity. The eighth beatitude shows that persecution is normal for the Christian:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.  
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.  
Do good anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.  
Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.  
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.  
Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you help them.  
Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you've got and you'll get kicked in the teeth.  
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God;  
It was never between you and them anyway.

“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Baptism itself makes the call part of everyone's universal call to holiness. This call demands an entirely new way of “seeing” how everything in the universe must be in relationship for the common good; how everything in the universe is meant to be at the service of the holy. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

Micah 6:8 tells us: “This is what the Lord God Yahweh asks of you; only this: That you act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.”

Having been empowered in this blessing, we are given not just a new name but two names that express our beatitude – “You are the salt of the earth” – “You are the light of the world.”

The beatitudes start with the idea of placing our complete confidence in God (poverty of spirit). They conclude with the lesson that those who live and lead by these beatitudes are likely to be criticized, ridiculed or even persecuted for the sake of righteousness. The outcome of the first and last beatitude is the same: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” .

Living the Beatitudes on this limited planet will ultimately bring us wisdom's reward, “...Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34).

