

Blessed are the merciful

By [Dora Dueck](#)

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I belong to a Mennonite-Catholic dialogue group which meets several times a year. Our assignment for this week's meeting was a personal reflection on the Beatitudes, broadly, and then more specifically, in choosing one beatitude we were particularly "attracted" to at this point — in not more than seven minutes each! The contributions were varied, and all interesting. This was mine:

I memorized many parts of the Sermon on the Mount as a child, to get a reduction on Bible camp fees. So it seems the Beatitudes have been with me forever, like old markers, like a fence around my life. They've been markers for my (Mennonite) understanding of discipleship.

In this reflection, however, I was struck by something else. The opening beatitudes [blessed are the poor, mourning, meek, hungry], at least, seem an expression of holes in the soul. I see need, grief, poverty of whatever kind, hunger. Yes, there's a happiness expressed, but next to gaping wounds.

I attended some of the events of the Thin Air writers' festival here in Winnipeg last week, and found it interesting that writers like Miriam Toews, Rosemary Nixon, Wayne Tefs, said things like "we're all wounded" and "we're really messed up humans." I felt an honesty there that I encounter less often in church. We jump the "happy" or "blessed" right over the hole and proclaim the solid ground we've landed on: the kingdom, the satisfaction, the comfort, the earth for our heritage. But it's that emptiness, that hole in the center - that's what we bring.

It seems to me that these opening beatitudes are actually a description of faith. I'm reading Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, and he reminds, "To have faith is to be 'without works before God' (Rom. 4:5).... It is empty hands open for God to fill."

Empty hands open for God to fill. Over the last years I've felt acutely poor in my spirit. I've often wished I had more faith. But looking at faith this way, maybe I have more than I realize. — And if we set the empty hands of these beatitudes next to the gifts of God shown here, it's a picture of wholeness, or salvation.

You may protest that there's "doing" or discipleship here. I agree. But it emerges from the hole. The first that, to my mind, pulls out of the hole is the fifth in the Matthew list, which is the beatitude I'm particularly attracted to at this time.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. I'm needy of mercy, as implied in the second line within the statement of gift – but there's something huge required first. "Be merciful" and "by your standard of measure it will be measured to you." (Luke 6:38)

This is a challenge for me, and I think it's a challenge for the church. What challenges me is the notion that I/we determine the wideness of the mercy given to me/us. I'm thinking of the recent debates about hell, over Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*, for example. For many, the issue may be about Scripture, but I can't help feeling that underneath the fears and critique of going "soft" on hell there's a failure of mercy. We're like Jonah, who said, "I knew that you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, relenting from evil," and we're disappointed – mightily ticked off, in fact, and ready to give up on the whole business if that's what it involves – when God shows mercy to Nineveh.

I imagined the following scenario. What if hell is actually what I was taught growing up, an everlasting and literal torment, but that it's me who's set at the entrance, and I get to decide the fate of at least a few other people. The only stipulation is that whatever criteria I use in my investigation and my decision are recorded and they will be the ones used to "in" or "out" me. I can imagine that this might lead to some pretty "deep listening" on my part to the people I'm deciding about, and probably significantly shift the quality of my mercy. – Or maybe simply take me back to the holes that are my faith: "Nothing in my hands I (we) bring, simply to thy cross I (we) cling."

How can I/we learn to be merciful? There's some stories we might set ourselves into, to learn from. The book of Jonah, for one.

Or Jesus and the thief on the cross. (Luke 23:39-43) Richard John Neuhaus, in *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, reflects on Jesus' mercy in the words: "Truly, I say to you,

today you will be with me in paradise.” He writes, “The first one home is a thief. Jesus is not very fastidious about the company he keeps.”

Neuhaus further notes that Jesus is “not fastidious about the quality of faith.” The thief’s cry is a little thin as far as our preferred conversion narratives go, but, says Neuhaus, “Give him [Christ] an opening, almost any opening, and he opens life to wonder beyond measure.”

But there’s something else I find interesting in the encounter between Jesus and the thieves. The so-called good thief *first* shows mercy to Jesus. He puts in a word for him, defends him against the verbal abuse of his fellow thief. He shows himself merciful – and he is shown mercy.

How can our two churches – Mennonite and Catholic – engage in common witness around the Beatitudes? I wish both could be merciful in more radical ways. Be less fastidious. Be the first to show mercy to the shamed and excluded. Allow salvation to one another, for sure, and also to the whole world.

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