

**Living Beatitudes**  
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**February 2, 2020**

As we take a look at the Beatitudes this morning, I'd like to begin by telling you about my friend, the late Rev. Dr. Gustavo Parajon, a person who to me embodied the Beatitudes. Gus was a Baptist minister from Nicaragua. He came to the U.S. for his education where he earned his M.D. from Case Western Medical School and his Masters in Public Health from Harvard.

Upon returning home, Gus became a prominent figure in Nicaraguan evangelical and medical circles as well the world wide Baptist community. He pastored the First Baptist Church of Managua, in 1967 he founded the Nicaraguan Vaccination Program and in 1972, CEPAD, a faith based, interdenominational relief organization to aid victims of the earthquake that took 10,000 lives. By 1980 it had grown to serve the broader population with emergency relief, development and reconciliation programs. He won many awards for his commitment to peace and justice and serving the poor, including the Baptist World Alliance Human Rights award in 2006.

I met Gus when I made my first trip to Nicaragua with Witness for Peace in 1985. We visited the offices of CEPAD to learn about the important work they were doing as the intermediary between the evangelical churches and the newly elected Sandinista government as well as provide much needed medical care to the impoverished country.

Prior to our visit, Gus was appointed to the National Reconciliation Commission. This appointment led to misrepresentation in many church circles and in the U.S. media that CEPAD was a communist organization. CEPAD clinics became targets of Contra forces trying to overthrow the government - placing doctors, nurses and patients at risk. Gus himself was put on a Contra death list.

In 1987 Gus came to my hometown in Indiana to speak at a local Baptist church as well as at my father's Rotary chapter. He was a guest in my parent's home. I came home from seminary to see and hear him. Things did not go as we had expected.

At the church he spoke of living a life faithful to the teachings of Jesus and reported on the work of CEPAD and how it was ministering the poorest of the poor by providing medical care while also trying to heal the wounds of the country through programs of reconciliation. While he was speaking a man, stood up and began attacking him, calling him a communist. At that point I felt my body fill with rage and all the Christian passivism I espoused flew out the window and I was ready to take my (back then) 120 pound self, fly across the sanctuary and drag this man out of the church.

But Gus responded with grace that frankly put me in my place. He dealt with the angry man by extending his hand and addressing him as "My brother..." and talked to him from a position of shared faith and respect, with a meekness that was really strength. No yelling, no posturing. Just grace.

Unfortunately, the next day at Rotary, it was worse. Gus was accused by many members for being a communist because of his willingness to work with the new government on behalf of Nicaragua's poor and vulnerable population. He was treated with such disrespect that, as we had dinner that night, my father said he would resign from the organization. But Gus told him "no". "They need to hear your voice. You cannot give up." He implored us to keep working and speaking for those who had no voice and to speak out against the war being waged against his country and promote a message of peace. At Gus's death the General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance said "Gustavo was an exemplary leader among us in the defense of peace and justice. The BWA was inspired by his commitment to serving the needy, healing the wounded and uniting Christians in the service of people in need."

Now as said I saw Gus as someone who embodied and breathed the Beatitudes. And it would be easy for me to say 'well I'll never be like him so why even try. It's only a rare few, great leaders that truly live the Gospel.' But if we take our faith seriously, and believe that the Gospels are alive for us today then we are just as capable of living them out in our own lives.

The Beatitudes are blessings Jesus extended at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, they are often over spiritualized or seen as impractical for real daily living. The Beatitudes, in actuality, challenge us to both grow in our faith commitment and enlarge our capacity for compassion and action. They lift up a vision of new social order where God reigns.

And it is a challenge – as one scholar puts it "We admire the instruction but, we fear the implications of putting the words into practice. We live in a time when it seems the blessings given are to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear."

In the Beatitudes Jesus is literally turning the values of the world upside down."

So how do we live in the spirit of the Beatitudes? It can be overwhelming.

One description I read that I appreciate is the Beatitudes should be taken as a whole, building on one another to show us the way to live that leads to practicing our faith. A way that connects us to God and helps us receive nourishment from God, so that we are enabled to give hope and compassion to others in need.

Let's take a closer look.

Blessed are the poor in spirit is to be open to and dependent on God - Be teachable to what God is saying. As Richard Rohr says, it's checking our egos at the door, letting go of worldly things that weigh us down and admitting we are totally dependent on God.

Blessed are those who mourn - in the depths of our pain and grief we rely on this dependence on God to carry us through. As we experience pain and are comforted by God, we in turn can enter into the pain of others. As we embrace the dark moments in our lives, we become what Henri Nouwen described as wounded healers. When we are wounded healers, we are able to enter the suffering of others and are willing to act on their behalf.

**Blessed are the meek – meekness is often misunderstood as being weak, timid or harmless, but it actually is about being humble and in tune with God. It comes from a place of spiritual strength.**

**Then we move into the building block - Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – righteousness = justice. A reordering of relationships, restoring wholeness and community. By our acknowledging our spiritual dependence on God, putting our egos aside and working from a place of humility and woundedness we are inspired to do the work of God in the world around us. God’s justice is about radical compassion and seeing the worth of every human being.**

**Which leads us to mercy – Blessed are those who are merciful. Mercy encompasses compassion as well as forgiveness. Compassion, Nouwen tells us, is about entering the suffering of others – their brokenness and fear and standing in solidarity with them. Compassion he says “grows with the inner nature of recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of, land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust.”**

**Mercy and compassion are the building blocks to peacemaking. This is where it gets challenging and may feel scary and risky. Because when we follow the Beatitudes, the teaching of Jesus about participating in bringing about the kingdom of God, when we stand up to power for the sake of the poor, neglected, and persecuted and the foreigner we will certainly face at the least push back, or even as the final Beatitudes describe persecution and false accusations being uttered against us.**

**Whenever Jesus taught or helped people there was often opposition and criticism. His message was considered subversive by many in his time. Even today, there are those within the church, who consider Jesus’ teachings too liberal. Stephen Mattson of Sojourners magazine wrote -**

**“many Christians are wary of participating in social justice because of a deep-rooted fear of being labeled ‘liberal’ or progressive. Christians must recognize that our society is filled with numerous groups and communities facing systematic oppression and we must act. Participating in social justice is a Christian tradition inspired by Jesus.”**

**He goes on to say we should be “active participants for the sake of following Jesus – for the purpose of glorifying God through acts of justice, empowerment and love. Because everyone is created in the image of God and loved by God, we are responsible for identifying with the victimized – not rejecting their existence.”**

**This brings me back to my friend Gus and our conversation at my parents dining room table and his plea to us to keep talking about the suffering of the Nicaragua people, to not let our voices be silenced or shouted down, diminished or intimidated.**

**The message is the same today - coming from our black brothers and sisters, parents and children separated at the border and those living in fear of deportation, LGBTQ folks**

**fighting for their rights and to be accepted, victims of gun violence and those suffering the ravages of war and climate change.**

**Our voices for justice, compassion and peace must not be silenced. By following the living word of Christ in the Beatitudes, we find strength and connection with God, who sustains and nurtures us to do the work of bringing about God's reign for all of God's children.**