

The Beatitudes in the Desert

BY JONATHAN WILSON - HARTGROVE

In our fast-paced world of wars and anti-war activism, seeking wisdom from the ancient Christian solitaries may seem counterintuitive (or just flat wrong). Yet how they received Jesus' blessing in the Sermon on the Mount reveals how we can live faithfully in a broken world.

Bryan Hollon has written in these pages about new monastic communities that “aim not only to serve the urban poor, but also to reinvigorate traditional church institutions and become salt and light to a civilization in moral and spiritual disarray.”¹ I write from one such community—the Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina. I am a new monastic who longs to know what Jesus’ Beatitudes mean in the desert that is urban America. As I pause to write between knocks at the door and telephone calls, I have to confess that “serving the urban poor” and “reinvigorating the traditional church” sound like pretty lofty ideals.

Don’t get me wrong: I think they are good ideals. I pray that we somehow get around to those important tasks in the midst of everything else that comes up around here. But if we do, it is not because we have developed a master plan for successfully countering the “moral and spiritual disarray” of the world around us. We are neither smart enough nor pious enough to pull that off. What we do here is wake up every morning and thank God for blessing us with a way of life that does not lead to destruction. The best summary I know of that way of life is the Sermon on the Mount.

New monasticism’s connection to the Sermon goes back at least as far as the 1930s. “The restoration of the church,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “will surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ. I believe the time has come to rally people together for this.”² As best as I can figure, the oldest of new monastic

communities was just beginning in Germany when Bonhoeffer wrote this in 1935. From the little village of Sannerz, Eberhard Arnold shared his hopes for what would become the Bruderhof communities (recently renamed Christian Communities International). "We do not need theories or idealistic goals or prophets or leaders," he wrote. "We need brotherhood and sisterhood. We need to *live* Jesus' Sermon on the Mount..."³

It may well be that this is the essential new monastic impulse: to ask in the face of our world's greatest problems what it might look like for the people of God to live together according to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. But if this is truly a monastic impulse, then what new monastics are doing is not novel. It goes all the way back to the first monastic movement in the third- and fourth-century Egyptian desert. Of course, what is new is the context in which we are trying to live the way of Jesus. So a new monasticism needs both ancient wisdom and contemporary insight to be faithful. But, as Hollon rightly notes, we do not seek this faithfulness for the sake of our own piety. We are trying to hear the Beatitudes in today's deserts for the sake of our neighbors and the Church that we love.

What I would like to do in this article is pay attention to the role that the Beatitudes played for some of the first monastics. How did they receive the blessing of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? Like I said, their context was not the same as ours. But their faithfulness is a witness to us, and whether monastic or not, we all have a lot to learn from their wisdom about how to live faithfully in a broken world.

WHO WOULD JESUS BLESS?

If context matters, then it matters all the way down. We cannot hear Jesus' blessing well until we know something about those to whom he was speaking to in the Sermon. Thankfully, Matthew gives us a sketch of the crowd at the end of chapter four: "So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan" (4:24-25). While we are not sure who else was there, we know from Matthew that the sick, the troubled, and the down-and-out were present when Jesus started his Sermon with a list of blessings. It is worth noting that these were the very people who knew they were not blessed in Jesus' day. People with health, wealth, and social clout claimed God's blessing and offered their performances of piety as evidence. Most of the rabbis in Jesus' day went along with this religious show. By implication or expressed declaration, those who were sick, poor, or marginal were not blessed, but rather cursed. This is why it seemed perfectly normal for some people to ask Jesus whether a man was blind because of his own sin or the sin of his parents (John 9:1-3). Jesus' response in that situation reflects the position that he takes from the very beginning of his minis-

try in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus looks at a crowd of religious outcasts and social misfits and says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...."

Not long ago I was teaching a Bible study on the Sermon on the Mount at our local homeless shelter. It is a Bible study where about half the participants are residents in the shelter and the other half are seminary students and members of local churches. Because people in the study have such a diversity of experience, I always ask them to share what they hear as good news when we read a passage. The night we read the Beatitudes together, a man who lived at the shelter got excited. "Jesus is talkin' to us, man!" He sat up on the edge of his chair and smiled. "We're the poor. We're the one's who are crying and hungry and thirsty. Jesus says we're blessed!" He heard the gospel in the Beatitudes. And he became my teacher as I listened to Jesus' words in his context.

Much of the wisdom of the first monastic movement was collected in short stories about the ammas and abbas (the communities' revered women and men) and the memorable lines they shared with people who sought their counsel. In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* there are a number of stories about Abba Arsenius. He was a well-educated man of senatorial rank who had been appointed by the Roman emperor to tutor his sons. In something of a midlife crisis, Arsenius decided to sneak away to the Egyptian desert and learn from the monks there. One day someone noticed him consulting an old Egyptian monk. "Abba Arsenius," he asked, "how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?" Abba Arsenius replied to him, "I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not even know the alphabet of this peasant."⁴

The women and men who went to the Egyptian desert to learn a life of prayer came from a variety of backgrounds. Farmers, scholars, and former highway robbers, they all took seriously the fact that Jesus blessed the poor in spirit and said the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them. Everyone is invited to the Kingdom party, they knew, but only those who enter by the door of humility gain entrance. The desert monastics saw that worldly position does not matter to God, but that it does often get in the way of our relationship with God and one another. The early monastic scholar Evagrius Ponticus summarized the desert wisdom with this sage bit of advice: "Strive to cultivate a deep humility and the malice of the demons shall not touch your soul."⁵

For many of us new monastics, the wisdom of the desert has become real as we have apprenticed ourselves to poor and marginal Christians. Sure, we have learned some things from books and professors. But like Abba Arsenius, we realize that we have not even learned the spiritual alphabet of some of our neighbors. People who have lived on the under side of the American dream teach us how to hear the gospel anew and trust Jesus above all else. We inherit the Kingdom as we join them in day-to-day life and beg with them for God's reign to come on earth as it is in heaven.

LEARNING TO MOURN

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). Most of us want to be comforted, but not many people want to mourn. Frederica Mathews-Green describes what she calls the “Frosting Cycle” of self-comfort in contemporary society. “Imagine the person who decides to comfort herself with a can of frosting,” she writes. “For a while it tastes very, very good and she feels better – and then she starts feeling a good bit worse. Submerged in bad, icky feelings, what can she do? Then the can’s bright label catches her eye, and she thinks, ‘Chocolate makes me feel better.’”⁶ While resources for self-comfort may be more accessible than ever to middle-class Americans, the desire behind this cycle is not new. The desert tradition recognized this desire for easy comfort and taught its disciples to counter it, as Jesus suggests in the Beatitudes, with the practice of lament.

Abba Dioscorus reportedly wept aloud in his cell, while his disciple was sitting in another cell. Disturbed by the suffering of his abba, the disciple came to him and asked, “Father, why are you weeping?” “I am weeping over my sins,” the old man answered. Confused, his disciple said, “You do not have any sins, Father.” The old man replied, “Truly, my child, if I were to see my sins, three or four men would not be enough to weep for them.”⁷

The lament of Abba Dioscorus and others was not rooted in false humility or poor self-esteem, but rather in radical self-honesty. The most famous of the desert fathers, Abba Anthony, learned from personal experience that demonic powers can only be named and defeated when addressed directly, in the name of Jesus. For

those who followed him to the Egyptian desert, the monastic life was about learning a way of prayer that brought one face-to-face with the obsessions and illusions which so often control our attitudes and behaviors. This is a process that the contemporary monastic scholar Columba Stewart has called “manifestation of thoughts.” By confessing to an abba or amma the thoughts that came into their minds during prayer, the desert monastics learned to tell the truth about themselves and mourn the sin that was real in their lives.

No community can last long without its members learning to tell the truth about themselves. At the Rutba House we have what we call “sharing time” every Sunday evening, where we share in small groups what has hap-

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pened in our week and how we have processed it. Our commitment to one another is that we will not only listen during that time, but also pray for one another throughout the week and follow-up with our brothers and sisters about what is happening in their lives. Often sharing time is just a way to keep up with each other. But it can also become a space for talking about the parts of our lives that we would rather hide. Unlike “accountability

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groups,” which I have been part of before, we have to be pretty honest with one another in this group. After all, we live together. When I am sad or frustrated, people tend to notice. By God’s grace, they have helped me over time to name the thoughts and desires behind those feelings – and to mourn some of them. This has been a comfort that I have settled into slowly. As someone who

does not manifest my thoughts and feelings easily, I have a reputation for short reports during our “sharing time.” But the honesty of others has reassured me that I am not alone in my sin and that there is grace enough for me to face into the dark corners of my soul. If the desert tradition is right, then there is hope that my mourning will ultimately turn to joy as the light of Christ transforms me from the inside out.

FASTING TOWARD RIGHTEOUSNESS

Anyone who reads the literature from early monasticism notices that these folks took fasting seriously. Most modern people wonder if they didn’t take it a little too seriously. The reports suggest that many of the ammas and abbas ate bread only once a day or every other day. How could anyone survive very long on just that? Yet within the desert literature there is serious reflection on what makes for faithful fasting.

There was a man in an Egyptian village who developed such a reputation for going without food that he gained the nickname “Faster.” Abba Zeno heard about him in the desert and asked for him to come and visit. When the Faster came, apparently glad to have been recognized by a spiritual master, Abba Zeno greeted him, prayed, and invited him to sit down. Then Abba Zeno went on with his work in silence. Pretty soon the Faster got bored and asked Zeno to pray for him before he left. “Why?” Abba Zeno asked. “Because my heart is as if it were on fire,” the Faster said, “and I do not know what is the matter with it. For truly, when I was in the village and

I fasted until the evening, nothing like this happened to me.” Abba Zeno went on to explain to the Faster that while he was in the village, he had fed himself through his ears – maybe even filling himself with the good things others said about him. “But go away and from now on eat at the ninth hour and whatever you do, do it secretly,” the Abba advised. The Faster did this, but when he started eating every day, he found it difficult to wait until the ninth hour. Some who knew him began to say he was possessed by a demon. So the Faster went back to Abba Zeno and reported his struggle. Zeno said to him, “This way is according to God.”⁸

However extreme the fasts of the desert ammas and abbas may seem to us, it is clear that the point of their fasts was not to impress, but to help them become truly righteous in Jesus’ way. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” Jesus said, “for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6). Like spiritual Olympians, the desert monastics trained their bodies and spirits to race toward the Kingdom and not slow down for any lesser good. Of course, as the story about Abba Zeno demonstrates, they acknowledged the real needs of body and spirit for nourishment and rest. But these masters of the spiritual life also saw how easily we are deceived by our desires, hungering and thirsting for pleasures that distract us from God’s good gifts that would fill us to overflowing.

Our community has decided to do without a number of things for the sake of receiving God’s good gifts. They are not bad things, just things that tend to distract us. One example is the Internet. We are not Luddites. Most of us have computers. (I am writing this article on a laptop that can pick up wireless Internet and play DVDs.) But we have decided not to have Internet connections in our houses. By forgoing the convenience of checking e-mail at any time or Googling some question we do not know the answer to, we hope that we have more time and attention to focus on becoming more holy. Of course, we can (and often do) waste that time just as well without the Internet. But it has been freeing to say “no” to something that we can do without. I like to think it has, in a small way, freed us to pray.

RADICAL PEACEMAKING

The Rutba House is named after a little village in Iraq that saved our friends’ lives when we were with Christian Peacemaker Teams at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March of 2003. When their car wrecked in a side ditch after blowing a tire, some Iraqi civilians stopped by the roadside, took our friends into their car, and drove them to Rutba. There a doctor said to them, “Three days ago your country bombed our hospital, but we will take care of you.” He sowed up two of their heads and saved their lives. When we found our friends in Rutba and heard this story, I thanked the doctor for his help and asked him what we owed him. “You do not owe us anything,” he said. “Please just tell the world what has happened in Rutba.”

I came back to the United States in 2003 telling that story to anyone who

would listen. As I told it over and again, I began to realize that it was a modern day Good Samaritan story. The people who were supposed to be our enemies had stopped by the roadside, taken our friends out of the ditch, and carried them to safety. When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, he concluded by asking, "Who was a neighbor to this man?" His interlocutor answered, "The one who showed him mercy," and Jesus responded, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). The act of mercy we witnessed at Rutba was a sign to us of peacemaking at its best. So we committed to try to live into Jesus' instruction to "go and do likewise" by being a community of peacemakers at Rutba House.

But it is not easy to live peaceably in a violent world—not only because the violent will kill you, but also because this is the world we come from. We have its violence within us. Jesus blessed the peacemakers, saying that they will be called children of God (Matthew 5:9). As children of this world, we are violent. We are born into a struggle for survival, and we inherit survival skills that teach us to kill before we are killed. But the good news is that God wants to adopt us as children of the divine family. God, who is peace, wants to make us daughters and sons in the image of Jesus. The peacemakers are blessed because they receive this adoption. With it, they are given a new heart.

In the desert tradition, the state of this new heart is called *hesychasm*. It is the deep peace that fills a monk's heart after she has lamented her sins, wrestled the demons, fasted faithfully, and given her whole self over into the hands of a loving God. This peace is the goal of the monastic life. It is what the ammas and abbas teach us to strive for. But it is also a gift. Just as the way that we are called to walk is something Jesus gives us in the Sermon on the Mount, so too is the peace of God a gift that we receive as we trust Jesus and continue in obedience. The desert tradition says that this peace is like a fire that flares up within us, transforming us into beacons of peace.

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph, seeking some advice for how to advance in the monastic life. "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace as far as I can, I purify my thoughts," he said. "What else can I do?" Abba Joseph stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to Abba Lot, "If you will, you can become all flame."⁹

It may seem counterintuitive (or just flat wrong) to suggest that the answer to the violence of our world lies in the wisdom of ancient solitaries from the Middle East. But they help us to see truth that is so hard to focus on in our fast-paced world of wars and anti-war activism. The truth is that we are, all of us, broken creatures who are helplessly addicted to violence. Until we learn to lament this condition, there is no hope for us. But when we trust grace enough to face our sin, a loving God awaits us, longing to transform us into a people who live as God's peace for the world. From all that I see, the world has never needed that peace as much as it does now.

NOTES

1 Bryan Hollon, "St. Benedict in the City," *Cities and Towns*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics 20 (Summer 2006), 38. This article is available online through the Ethics Library at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

2 Letter of January 14, 1935, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3, 25, cited by Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, revised edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 380.

3 Eberhard Arnold, as quoted in Peter Mommsen, *Homage to a Broken Man* (Rifton, NY: The Plough, 2004), 22.

4 *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, translated by Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 10.

5 Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Eudes Bamberger (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 71.

6 Frederica Matthews-Green, *The Illumined Heart* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2001), 33.

7 *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 55.

8 *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 67.

9 *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 103.

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