

Living the Beatitudes Today

BY ARTHUR PAUL BOERS

The Beatitudes are constantly in danger of becoming churchy clichés we repeat but don't ponder. These three books, rooted in conviction and faithful living, avoid the temptation to tone down their provocative content. They allow Christ's teachings to open our imaginations and invite us into a moral revolution.

Mass shootings have a “here-we-go-again” feel about them in our society. These sensational events briefly make headlines as the media invade for several days of “in-depth” coverage. We learn intimate details about the victims, the perpetrators are scrutinized, public soul-searchers consider how this tragedy might have been avoided, and memorial services are observed. Then attention moves away and we await the next shooting.

But in October 2006, a group of Christian victims rewrote this predictable scenario. At Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, stubborn, plainly dressed Amish folks (who were overrun by the media attention they normally shun) let it be known within a day – informally by word of mouth – that they forgave the crimes. Then they visited the shooter's widow and shared donations with her, and they showed up at the perpetrator's burial. They noted that there was nothing remarkable about forgiveness. They just did what Jesus commanded in the Sermon on the Mount. Forgiveness – its strangeness and inexplicability – suddenly became the focus of Nickel Mines media accounts. Good news had become headline news.

The witness of this Amish community reminds us of the striking possibilities that emerge when we take seriously the Sermon on the Mount. Here we see why Matthew 5-7 serves as a distillation of Jesus' message, a “canon within the canon.”



In *The Beatitudes for Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, 124 pp., \$14.95) James C. Howell, the senior minister at Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, has written a simple and accessible but challenging and informative introduction. This volume is in the publisher's "For Today" series that provides reliable resources for laity on Bible study, theological traditions, and Christian practices. Projected and published topics in this series include Psalms, Lord's Prayer, Ten Commandments, hymns, Apostles' Creed, prayer, and parables. The books are suitable for reading and study by individuals, in adult Sunday school classes, and in other continuing education settings. Footnotes are minimal and each chapter includes questions for discussion.

True to its introductory nature, Howell covers some ground that the other authors do not. While he focuses more on Matthew's Beatitudes, he pays attention to Luke's take on them as well. He considers some of the history of the beatitude genre. He even reflects on which mountaintop the sermon may have occurred, though in the end, of course, the exact location is not as important as the symbolic meaning of mountains in Scripture.

Since this book is geared toward "regular folk," it has the potential of having the greatest impact of the three books in this review. Nevertheless, Howell avoids the temptations to dumb down the Beatitudes (there are no "Be-happy-attitudes" à la Robert Schuller here) and tone down their provocative content. He speaks often of the countercultural nature of these words, which feel like "repeated mental jolts" (p. 84). Since we cite them so frequently in church settings, they have the danger of becoming churchy clichés that we repeat but do not ponder. Howell enlivens the Beatitudes by contrasting them to conventional wisdom that commends corporate ladders, good families, wealth, and consumerism. Along the way, Howell takes issue with positive thinking, American myths of self-sufficiency, and health and wealth prosperity gospel claims.

The Beatitudes open our imaginations and invite us into a moral revolution. "Truth always has a way of clashing with the status quo, with the vested patterns of sinful behavior in which even religious people get stuck," Howell asserts with Wesleyan fervor. "Why would we expect to find ourselves in sync with a world that is so out of sync with God?" (pp. 86, 88). Rarely do we encounter such forthrightness.

Howell cites numerous authorities, people I like and admire as well: Frederick Buechner, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gustavo Gutierrez, Therese of Lisieux, Desert Fathers and Mothers, Henri Nouwen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Clarence Jordan, and Dorothy Day. Except in one brief chapter, "Saints and Heroes," he cites short sayings and observations, but not much in the way of stories. I wanted to read narratives of living out the Beatitudes, especially stories that were fresh and unfamiliar. To be more

compellingly persuasive, this volume would have benefited from accounts of radical, countercultural faithfulness. Pretty words, compelling phrases, and even the most careful theology need to be fleshed out imaginatively with examples of those who experiment with living out God's truths.

Even more important than these challenging examples of solitary "heroes and saints" would be accounts of Christian *communities* living out Jesus' challenging mandates. The miracle of a community like Nickel Mines, for instance, is the fact that the community and its practices still exist where the seemingly unimaginable has become reality.



In *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, 140 pp., \$14.95) Erik Kolbell brings intriguing credentials to the task of unpacking the Beatitudes. He served as the Minister of Social Justice at Riverside Church in New York and is also a psychotherapist. His book is compatible with Howell's and there is even some overlap between them. Like Howell, Kolbell is articulate and passionate about the social implications of the "blessed" sayings.

One new contribution he makes, however, is his deep conviction that these Beatitudes are not a completely new genre, sprung fully from the imagination of Jesus. Rather, he speaks of Jesus as Rabbi and notes the Jewish roots of these blessings. At their best then, they are not about creating a new religion but about reviving an old one. The book would be stronger if he explored this idea in more depth. One implication of this assertion is that the Beatitudes still have the potential of reviving our own Christian faith today as well.

The Beatitudes captivate us not only because of their theological depth or radical implications. Their beauty of language—as in other beloved texts like Psalm 23—is an important factor in their attractiveness. They are "wondrous because each is a poetic and exquisitely paradoxical meditation on how to live a life of faith in a world of doubt," Kolbell observes. "In lilting beauty and fluid verse, the Beatitudes sanctify those qualities in us that are the very antithesis of success as we in the West have come to understand (and pursue) it" (p. 12).

Jesus commends a sanctified life. That is an agenda too often missing from our discourse today, where "good life" is measured materially by the value of cars, size of houses, quality of televisions, and dollar amount of pensions. Yet Kolbell notes that the Beatitudes are not just personal: "each one binds the personal promise of faith to the public imperative of discipleship" (p. 13). Kolbell is unabashedly convinced about the "moral might of nonviolence" (p. 63) and winningly makes his case over and over again.

One can imagine he preached this radical discipleship at Riverside as well, and stretches of the book feel like well-crafted sermons. Indeed, a

particular pleasure is Kolbell's way with words. He writes in carefully wrought aphorisms, such as this one: "I believe that virtue esteemed in principle can become morality achieved in practice" (p. 39).

Kolbell includes more stories in his book than does Howell. Many of these fit well with the tenor of the scripture text, especially those about peacemaking and civil rights struggles in the United States. But others could have been skipped: movie stars' lives are not that inspirational and actually contradict the ethos of the Beatitudes. And Kolbell dwells a little too much on the therapy of his own clients (reflecting the tendency in our culture to reduce the gospel to the therapeutic).



Jim Forest's *The Ladder of the Beatitudes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999, 163 pp., \$13.00) is the most innovative book in this collection. His own story, which is the topic of his earlier books but is not described much here, is itself a testimony to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Forest left the United States Navy in the 1960s as a new Catholic and a conscientious objector. He joined the New York Catholic Worker, where he collaborated closely with Dorothy Day. Then he was befriended by Dan and Phil Berrigan and developed a close relationship with Thomas Merton. While working for the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, he made frequent trips behind the Iron Curtain in the 1980s.

The latter experience convinced him of the rich faith of Christian Orthodoxy, and he eventually joined the Russian Orthodox Church. Both his decades-long commitment to peacemaking and his nurture in Orthodoxy (he is secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship) deeply inform this book.

Forest argues for the interconnectedness and deliberate ordering of the Beatitudes: they are eight

crucial aspects of faithful discipleship with "a ladder-like structure, with poverty of spirit the essential starting point and with the cross at the top" (p. xi). In fact, they are a condensed summary of Jesus' teaching, one that is easily memorized and intriguingly well known within our culture. These words are intended for all Christians, not just monks, priests, or nuns, and not just in a particular chronological era (as Dispensationalists argue). And

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they are always challenging, for “each of the beatitudes has to do with dying to self” (p. 146).

Any Christian tradition that emphasizes discipleship risks falling into legalism and self-righteousness. Forest avoids this risk by matter-of-factly observing, “The Christian life is climbing the ladder of the beatitudes – and when we fall off, starting once again” (p. 2).

Forest draws numerous connections between the Beatitudes and other

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scriptural passages and themes. Stories and stunning sayings from the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Celtic Christianity, American Christian traditions of peace- and justice-making, and, of course, Orthodox Christians amplify his interpretation. The book is nicely illustrated

with reproductions of icons and other religious art.

Jim Forest takes Jesus seriously and does not cut corners on what it means to be a disciple. He puts much emphasis on prayer and worship. At the same time he shows deep empathy and compassion for those who have trouble believing, let alone following, Jesus the Christ. Yet there is no other-worldly piety here:

A Christian is obliged to see and respond to the real world with all its fear, pain, and bloodstains, to be a rescuer, to protect the defenseless, to participate here and now in God’s righteousness.

A way of prayer that makes one blind to the least person is a door to hell. (pp. 69-70)

The Ladder of the Beatitudes is unevenly paced. Some of the chapters are as short as two pages (these feel like a brief devotional) and others as long as twenty-two. Forest’s writing here is not as eloquent or clever as Kolbell’s. Occasionally he rambles, as if these reflections were given orally and not well edited for print.

Nevertheless, this is the book that will most startle readers and overturn their preconceptions. But for all their unsettling insistence that we change, Forest reminds us that the Beatitudes are “blessed” promises – they lead us to *rejoicing*.



Each of these books, rooted in conviction and faithful living, offers much to any group that wishes to explore the Beatitudes. None is likely to satisfy scholarly academics. For that, one should turn elsewhere.

I remain most interested in how and whether Christians live out Jesus' Beatitudes. A couple of years ago I spent a month walking on a pilgrimage in Spain and had long conversations with non-Christians from all over the world.[†] When they asked about what Mennonites believe and I explained the peace position, each one was startled, even shocked. They all gave the same reason for perplexity: "But what about George Bush?" In other words, his militaristic policies are becoming the face of Christianity in the wider world.

Here's my fantasy. I return to Spain and relive those very conversations. But this time people light up in recognition and respond: "Oh, you mean like the Amish of Nickel Mines."

NOTE

[†] I reflect on this experience in *The Way Is Made by Walking: A Pilgrimage Along the Camino de Santiago* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).



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