



Sermon on the Mount

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GENERAL EDITOR Robert B. Kruschwitz
ART EDITOR Heidi J. Hornik
REVIEW EDITOR Norman Wirzba
PROCLAMATION EDITOR William D. Shiell

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Elizabeth Sands Wise
DESIGNER Eric Yarbrough

PUBLISHER The Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361

PHONE (254) 710-3774
TOLL-FREE (USA) (866) 298-2325
WEB SITE www.ChristianEthics.ws
E-MAIL Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

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STUDY GUIDES & LESSON PLANS

These six study guides integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in the *Sermon on the Mount* issue.

GOD'S ENABLING GRACE

The Sermon on the Mount seems filled with stringent laws and calls for us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Where is God's enabling grace? The Sermon offers Jesus' sayings as verbal icons through which we may see into God's will and be empowered for the moral life.

THE FREEDOM OF OBEDIENCE

Are the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount for all of us, or just the most religious? The Sermon calls us to be obedient to God's new revelation, Jesus himself, the now-risen Christ. It offers us the freedom of obedience to the Gentle and Humble One who invites us to himself, indeed, to be as he is.

INTERPRETING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

For the verbal icons in the Sermon on the Mount to mold our character and guide our decisions, they must be interpreted in three contexts: in the Gospel of Matthew, the New Testament, and the biblical plot as a whole.

WITH EARS TO HEAR

If we hear the Sermon on the Mount with ears trained only by a historical perspective, we will keep it at a distance from us and our communities. To be Scripture for the Church, it must be performed as a living word with voice and presence—as we both speak its words in the sanctuary and live its way in the fabric of human community.

BEATITUDES IN THE DESERT

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.

JESUS IS FOR LOSERS

We may be drawn together by isolating ourselves from evildoers or by joining with broken sinners who cry out to God. Both of these are magnetic and contagious. Jesus warns, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." Folks are hungry for a Christianity that mirrors Jesus, not the judgmentalism that has done more to repel than to woo people towards God's grace.

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

So simple and straightforward, yet so endlessly captivating, the Sermon on the Mount is a startling invitation to see and inhabit an alternative world—where the new creation has already come in Jesus himself.

How can the Sermon on the Mount be so fundamental and basic to Christian discipleship, yet so shockingly radical? How can it be simple and straightforward, yet so endlessly captivating? Jesus' invitation in the Sermon is not, at its deepest level, to follow a list of moral rules. "Something bigger—and indeed more startling—is at work," Charles Campbell has reminded us. "The Sermon on the Mount offers a vision of an alternative world...[that] shocks us out of our commonsense, taken-for-granted assumptions so that we might see the world differently, and possibly glimpse the new creation that has come in Jesus himself."

Rather than laying down "stringent laws" and advising readers "to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps," the Sermon offers "verbal icons through which we may see into God's will and be empowered for the moral life," Charles Talbert suggests in *Grace in the Sermon on the Mount* (p. 11). God's enabling grace is expressed not in the language of divine indwelling (which is so common in Pauline and Johannine writings), but in terms of transforming vision. As the Sermon enables us to see Christ, we are "transformed by that vision of God that enables the conquest of evil passions and the acquisition of virtue."

In *The Freedom of Obedience* (p. 19), Bonnie Thurston agrees the Sermon's call for radical obedience is not "for conformity to legitimate external rules, which is difficult enough, but for the total transformation of a person 'from the inside out.' To be obedient to Jesus is to become as he is, humble and gentle." Matthew urges us to "hear" Jesus and to respond by becoming like him. "It is enough," Jesus says, "for the disciple to be like the teacher" (Matthew 10:25).

But hearing the Sermon as authoritative Scripture is difficult for us, writes Richard Ward in *With Ears to Hear* (p. 27). We prefer to reflect on how and why its passages were assembled *then*, not what Christ is calling us to be and do *now*. “If we hear the Sermon on the Mount with ears trained only by a historical perspective, we will keep it at a distance from us and our communities. If it is to be Scripture for the Church, then we must find ways to release its capacity to address us as a living word with voice and presence.” To begin with a literal level, Ward notes that many of us have never *heard* the Sermon read; thus, he explores how it might be performed in worship so that we feel addressed once again by our Sovereign. However, what is “at stake is...not simply how we speak the Sermon’s words in the sanctuary,” he reminds us, “but how we perform its *way* in the intricate fabric of human community.”

So many wonderful strands of Jesus’ teaching are woven into the Sermon that we tend to isolate them in our study and worship. While Richard Ward makes a strong case for reading the entire Sermon through, Ann Bell Worley takes another thoughtful approach in her service of worship (p. 38). Through a series of unison, responsive, and antiphonal readings, she invites us to hear and respond to the opening Beatitudes, the three major teaching portions of the Sermon—on the law, worship, and the practice of faith—and the concluding warnings. She makes use of many traditional hymns and tunes, but also contributes a new hymn, “From Galilee He Preaches Still” (p. 35), in which she links the crisscrossing themes from the Sermon on the Mount. Thus she writes, “You are the salt, you are the light, to glorify your God; / be perfect as your Father is: do everything in love.”

A number of our contributors find the interpretive key to the Sermon in its opening poem. In *The Beatitudes in the Desert* (p. 60), Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove explores how the fourth-century women and men who went to the Egyptian desert heard in Christ’s blessings an inspiring call to a new life of prayer and service to others. “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,” claims Wilson-Hartgrove.

The Sermon is addressed to a motley crowd suffering from seizures, severe pain, demon possession, and paralysis—“pretty much the walking wounded, if they are walking at all,” Burt Burleson observes in *You Are Blessed* (p. 51). “And in the midst of their suffering, not only is human instinct telling them the gods must not be pleased with them, their religious culture teaches them ‘If you are ill, there must be a skeleton in your spiritual closet.’” How amazing, then, that Jesus begins by announcing they are blessed by God. “This is where our encounter with Jesus always begins,” Burleson says. “It has to begin here with God’s grace coming down from this mountain. If we cannot get this, then we cannot get Jesus.” In *Blessed-*

ness (p. 56), Joy Jordan-Lake brings this insight home to families and congregations: "The gospel becomes good news only if we have somehow wised up and lumped ourselves alongside the losers and strugglers, or alongside those who have somehow, at some point, messed up," she writes. "It is good news only if we know the inside story about who we are, despite all that the outside world thinks we have achieved."

In *Jesus Is for Losers* (p. 68), Shane Claiborne tackles one of Jesus' hardest teachings in the Sermon: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." We are so easily drawn into what is only a simulacrum of Christian community by "isolating ourselves from evildoers" and gathering with people who share our social status and political views. Yet "folks are hungry for a Christianity that mirrors Jesus," Claiborne reminds us, "not the judgmentalism that has done more to repel than to woo people towards God's grace." How do we make discerning judgments without becoming judgmental?

That Jesus extends his blessing and call to discipleship to all people – to the social insiders and outcasts of every nation and across the centuries – is a theme of the artwork in this issue. *The Sermon on the Mount* (cover art) by Laura James "portrays Christ as a person of color in order to emphasize the ecumenical appeal of the gospel," Heidi Hornik explains in *The Universality of Christ and His Teachings* (p. 46). Cosimo Rosselli employs traditional iconography in *The Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Leper* to depict Matthew's narrative, but as Hornik notes in *Teaching through Images* (p. 48), there are interesting twists in his famous fresco. In the crowd around Jesus, figures from Rosselli's century mingle among the first-century audience, including the man healed from leprosy after the Sermon.

Arthur Paul Boers warns "the Beatitudes are constantly in the danger of becoming churchy clichés we repeat but don't ponder." In *Living the Beatitudes Today* (p. 84) he recommends three books – *The Beatitudes for Today* by James C. Howell, *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life* by Eric Kolbell, and *The Ladder of the Beatitudes* by Jim Forest – that do not tone down their provocative content. Instead, these authors "allow Christ's teachings to open our imaginations and invite us into a moral revolution."

In *The World Is Thus* (p. 77), Gregory Clark commends three recent interpretations of the Sermon – Charles Talbert's *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, Dale Allison's *The Sermon on the Mount*, and Glen Stassen's *Living the Sermon on the Mount* – for clearly showing how it "stands in continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures and commentaries." Therefore, its central message for today cannot be "Jesus saves us from Judaism." Rather it is that "Jesus is necessary and inevitable for the Christian imagination in ways that the nation-state, capitalism, technology, and even democracy are not." And that, Clark concludes, is truly "a different, more original gospel." ☞

Grace in the Sermon on the Mount

BY CHARLES H. TALBERT

The Sermon on the Mount seems filled with stringent laws and calls for us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Where is God's enabling grace? The Sermon offers Jesus' sayings as verbal icons through which we may see into God's will and be empowered for the moral life.

Christians usually regard Paul and the author of the Gospel of John as theologians of grace. No fair-minded reader would disagree. The Gospel of Matthew is another matter. The First Gospel generally and the Sermon on the Mount specifically seem filled with stringent laws and calls for readers to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Where in Matthew is the grace in general and the enabling grace in the moral life in particular?

In order to clarify the issue further, it is necessary to understand three different views of how the relation between God and humans operates. These three perspectives are usually called *legalism*, *covenantal nomism*, and *new covenant piety*. In the first, God gives the law. If human beings obey the law, God responds to their obedience by entering into a relationship with them. Here human obedience is the means by which a relation to God is gained. This is *legalism*.

In the second perspective, God graciously enters into a relation with humans. In the context of a relationship already established, God gives the law as a guide to humans about what pleases and displeases him. If humans follow the guidance (that is, obey), they do so out of gratitude for what God has already done for them. This is *covenantal nomism*.

In the third, God graciously enters into a relation with humans. In the context of a relation already established God gives guidance about what

pleases and displeases him. When humans follow that guidance, it is because God graciously enables their obedience. This is *new covenant piety*.

Christians usually place Paul and John within new covenant piety. Matthew's view normally is identified either as legalism or as covenantal nomism. When this is done the Sermon on the Mount is read either as God's law that must be obeyed if we are to gain a relation to God (legalism) or as God's demands that must, out of gratitude, be followed if we are to remain within the relation with God (covenantal nomism). Neither of these readings would locate Matthew's Sermon on the Mount within the new covenant piety represented by Paul and the Fourth Gospel. My aim is to show how the Sermon should and can fit within the new covenant piety characterized by Paul and John. How is that possible?

TWO MODELS OF GOD'S ENABLING GRACE

Ancient Mediterranean peoples talked about God's enabling grace in two different ways. One way of speaking about God's enabling action is the language of indwelling. This is how Christians have normally read Paul and John. Consider Philippians 2:12b-13, "work out your own salvation...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure," or Galatians 2:19b-20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me," or Romans 8:9-11, "the Spirit of God dwells in you...Christ is in you...the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you," or Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The Pauline letters emphasize the indwelling of God, the Spirit, and the risen Christ in believers. This indwelling enables believers both to desire and to do God's will. This is new covenant piety. Consider also:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers.... (John 15:4-6)

This Johannine text shows clearly that the Evangelist understood the ongoing relation between God and disciples as enabled by a mutual indwelling. This is new covenant piety. The absence of the language of indwelling in Matthew has been largely responsible for Christians' inability to see the enabling grace of new covenant piety in this Gospel in general and in the Sermon on the Mount in particular.

The other model to consider is that of transformation by vision. In the Mediterranean world there was a general belief that being in the presence of a deity caused a transformation of the self. Pythagoras, for example, declared that "our souls experience a change when we enter a temple and

behold the images of the gods face to face" (Seneca, *Epistle* 94.42).¹ This conviction was widespread. In the non-Jewish world, for example, the vision of the gods changes one's whole person; the vision of deity transforms one's character – it is being born again (*Corpus Hermeticum* 10.6 and 13.3). In the Jewish world, for example, Philo of Alexandria teaches that seeing God yields virtue and nobility of conduct (*On the Embassy to Gaius* 1.5); the Therapeutae (the "physicians of the soul," a community of philosophers whom Philo admires) desire a vision of God, a vision which results in changes for the better in their behavior (*On the Contemplative Life* 2.11); Moses preferred the better food of contemplation, through whose inspiration he grew in grace (*On the Life of Moses* 2.69); and in the mind that has the vision of God, God enables the acquisition of virtue (*On the Preliminary Studies* 56). The model is found also in early Christian sources. Paul says that Christians who behold the face of the Lord are being changed from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18). In 1 John 3:6, we are told that no one who sins habitually has seen God, who has no sin. In these selected examples the model of divine enablement is transformation by vision.

The model came to be used for the effects of association with philosophers and kings. For example, Xenophon says of Socrates that nothing was more useful than being with him and spending time with him in any place or circumstances (*Memorabilia* or *Memoirs of Socrates* 4.1.1); for as long as they were with him, Socrates enabled his disciples to conquer their evil passions (1.2.24-28). Seneca agrees that association with good men is an aid to virtue (*Epistle* 94.40-42). To be with a philosopher and to see him would transform his associates. The same effect was believed to result from seeing a good king. In the Pythagorean Diotegenes's *On Kingship*, fragment two, we hear that as the king has righteousness in himself, he is able to infuse it into the entire state when citizens see him live. To look upon the good king affects the souls of those who see him.

The disciples see Jesus live and they hear his words. Being with him is to be transformed by that vision of God that enables the conquest of evil passions and the acquisition of virtue.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples are with Jesus. They see him live and hear his words. He is depicted as the ideal king and the ideal teacher. He is, moreover, Emmanuel, God with us (1:23). Being with Jesus is to be transformed by that vision that enables the conquest of evil passions and the acquisition of virtue. This model is at work in the First Gospel generally. When we come to the Sermon and hear Jesus call the disciples "salt of the earth" and "light of the

world,” the only thing that has come before in the plot of the Gospel is Jesus’ call of disciples in 4:18-22 and their following him and being with him thereafter. Being with Jesus (which equals seeing him) transforms.

TRANSFORMATION BY VISION

What about Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount? How do they fit into the model of a disciple being transformed by vision? In the Sermon, the sayings of Jesus function as verbal icons, windows through which we may see into the unconditioned will of God. Seeing God’s will is seeing God. The vision does more than communicate information. It effects changes in those who see. By enabling a new way of seeing reality, the language changes their perspective, disposition, intention, and motivation. This is what is meant by character formation. The sayings in the Sermon perform this function. They effect change. This is Matthew’s way of understanding God’s enablement of human ethical transformation.

We can illustrate this model with many examples from the Sermon. Let us begin with the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12). The first four beatitudes deal with the disciple’s vertical relationship (before God); the last five focus on horizontal relationships (with others)—three with relationships in which disciples have the initiative, followed by two with relationships in which disciples are acted upon. They offer a portrait of disciples and give promises to them. The first eight beatitudes are stated in the third person—“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and so on. They sketch the outlines of a good person, a person of piety toward God and right behavior toward other humans. Such a portrait of the ideal disciple, when held up before the auditors to see, would have a transforming effect. Plutarch tells how: when one is confronted with the vision of a good person it “creates a craving all but to merge his own identity in that of the good person” (*On Advancing in Virtue* 84D). In his *Pericles* 1-2, Plutarch says the vision of the Good implants in those who see it, a great and zealous eagerness to be good. The Good “creates a stir of activity towards itself, and implants at once in the spectator an active impulse” to become what is contemplated. The ninth beatitude shifts to second person—“Blessed are *you*”—thereby drawing listeners into an identification with the portrait given. This is who they are. A new way of seeing themselves occurs with the shift from third to second person. Participation in the dispositions and intentions reflected in the portrait is effected. This really is who we are! Jesus sees us this way. In its portrait of disciples, the poem functions to form the character of the auditors in their vertical and horizontal relationships. The Beatitudes (5:3-12) are not demands to acquire these virtues, but are a verbal portrait of the good into which we are drawn and by which we are transformed by a vision of the Good.

The so-called antitheses (5:21-48) of the Sermon contain six examples of Jesus’ interpretation of the Scriptures. They begin with “You have heard” and continue with “But I say.” This formula indicates what is happening.

Jesus quotes Scripture, often with a current interpretation either attached or implied, and then gives his own interpretation that embodies God's unconditioned will, the higher righteousness (5:20). For example, 5:21-26 begins with "You have heard... 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'" That is, if you murder you will face judgment. Jesus continues, "But I say... if you are angry with a brother or sister... if you insult a brother or sister... if you say, 'You fool,'" you will face judgment. That is, the divine intent in the Law's prohibition against murder is that there be no broken relationships among God's people, either that I cause (5:22) or that I fail to restore when I have been at fault (5:23-24, 25-26). Rather than functioning as a law against anger and insults, the antithesis aims to shape the disciple's character in the direction of a total concern for the health and wholeness of relationships among God's people. The material functions as a verbal icon through which one sees into the divine will. Like the painted icon, the verbal icon provides a window into divine reality, making possible the perception of the spiritual world. In this case, it is the divine will behind the particular command in Scripture. To be enabled to see differently, moreover, is to be transformed. Character includes one's perceptions, dispositions, intentions, and motivations. To see differently is to have our perceptions altered. From that come changes in our dispositions, intentions, and motivations. Like the Beatitudes, the antitheses function to shape character by enabling a new way of seeing God's will.

In Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus speaks about giving alms, praying, and fasting. Note that the language is very specific. For example, in verses 2-4 only two possibilities of action are mentioned: sounding a trumpet and not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing; in verses 5-6 only two possibilities are mentioned: standing in synagogues or on street corners and hiding in a closed room; in verses 16-18 only two possibilities are mentioned: disfiguring one's face on the one hand and putting oil on one's head

To see differently is to have our perceptions altered. From that come changes in our dispositions, intentions, and motivations. The Beatitudes and antitheses shape character by enabling a new way of seeing God's will.

and washing one's face on the other. The language is extreme and striking. Sounding a trumpet to announce one's gift, doing one's praying on street corners, and disfiguring one's face to announce one's fasting are hyperbole; they are caricatures revealing a tendency in human nature. In a caricature an inclination is magnified so that we may see it in its most blatant and ridiculous form. This specific and extreme language belongs to a pattern.

The repetition makes the forcefulness of the words increase. This unit is not case law. It is rather a verbal icon that shapes the character of the readers by enabling us to see differently.

Matthew 6:25-34, which begins “do not worry about your life,” is not an ethical text with a horizontal focus. It focuses rather on the vertical dimension, the relation of disciples with God. It functions not to offer concrete counsels on what to do with wealth but to reassure believers about God’s trustworthiness. Moreover, the text does not simply give a command. We do not stop worrying or avoid debilitating anxiety by obeying a command to do so. It takes more than a rule or law to deal with human anxiety. Only divine enablement makes trust in God possible. A change can only take place if we see the world in a fundamentally new and different way. If 6:25-34 is taken as moral exhortation, it sounds in its agricultural context like an obligation to abandon all farming and storage of products and in our context like an obligation to burn all our insurance and retirement policies. Then all sorts of stratagems must be employed to try to make sense of the material. As moral exhortation, 6:25-34 does not make sense. As a catalyst for the formation of the character of disciples in the direction of trust in God’s providential goodness by enabling them to see a different kind of world, it makes very good sense. It is a verbal icon that lets us see into the divine providence behind our world and our lives. With a different perception of reality, dispositions, intentions, and motivations change.

HEARING THE SERMON TODAY

If the Sermon on the Mount functions primarily as a verbal icon that enables us to see into divine reality and by this vision shapes our character (our perceptions, dispositions, intentions, and motivations), does it have anything to do with guiding our behavior? Let us return to 5:21-26. If this antithesis aims not to give a law prohibiting the emotion of anger and insulting acts but to shape the character of a disciple by enabling a new way of seeing the divine intent, what does the material in this paragraph have to do with the formulation of a normative Christian stance about anger? In order for 5:21-26 to function as part of a normative guide for Christian decision making, the pericope on anger must be read in context. There are three contexts that are a required part of this reading: in the context of Matthew as a whole, in the context of the New Testament as a whole, in the context of the biblical plot as a whole.

We begin with the First Gospel as a whole. In doing so, we must consider the story of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple (Matthew 21:12-17) which assumes anger on Jesus’ part and 23:17 which has Jesus call the scribes and Pharisees “blind fools.” Since Jesus is regarded as the one who fulfills all righteousness (3:15) and the one with the highest status in the kingdom (28:18), he cannot be judged deficient in these two cases. How do these passages shape how we read 5:21-26?

The second context is the whole of the New Testament. Reading Matthew 5:21-26 in the context of the whole New Testament confronts us with texts such as Mark 1:43 and 3:5 where Jesus is angry (in dismissing with a stern warning the man healed of leprosy and in confronting people who would prevent him from healing on the Sabbath). We must consider the instruction, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27), in which verse 26a echoes Psalm 4:4a, verse 26b explains what 26a means, and verse 27 provides a basis for the action: do not hold onto anger.² We are also confronted with Luke 11:40 where Jesus says, “You fools”; Luke 12:20 that has God say, “You fool”; 1 Corinthians 15:36 where Paul calls his opponent “Fool!”; and Galatians 3:1 where the apostle addresses his readers as “O foolish Galatians.”

Finally, reading in the context of the Bible as a whole enables us to see that there are two foci in its reflections on anger. The first focus is on anger for a righteous cause—for instance, God’s anger (Exodus 4:14; Numbers 11:10; 12:9; 22:22; 25:3; Deuteronomy 4:25; 6:15; 7:4; 9:18; 29:20; Joshua 23:16, etc.), Moses’ anger (Exodus 32:19), and Jeremiah’s anger (Jeremiah 6:11) are for righteous causes; and Sirach warns that *unrighteous* anger cannot be justified (1:22). The second focus is that we should refrain from anger that is held onto (that issues in revenge, etc.)—for example, “Refrain from anger and forsake wrath” (Psalm 37:8) and “Anger and wrath, these are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them” (Sirach 27:30).

In no place in the threefold context (of Matthew, the New Testament, and the Bible) is the emotion of anger prohibited in an absolute way. What is prohibited is the holding on to anger and the expression of anger in negative ways. Does this mean that Matthew 5:22 stands alone in prohibiting absolutely the emotion of anger? A close reading of the verse shows that the Greek present participle yields the meaning “everyone who is angry in an ongoing way,” that is, who holds on to his or her anger and expresses it in acts of insult toward a brother or sister. In this case, Matthew 5:22 fits into the larger biblical stream of prohibition against holding on to one’s anger and expressing it in harmful ways towards others. At this point, but not until this point, are we ready to use Matthew 5:21-26 in Christian ethical decision making.

CONCLUSION

The Sermon on the Mount functions not as law to be obeyed either as a means of gaining a relationship to God (legalism) or out of gratitude for what God has already done for us in order to remain in that relationship with God (covenantal nomism). The sayings of Jesus in the Sermon function as verbal icons (windows into God’s world) that enable readers to see into God’s unconditioned will. This vision of the divine transforms our character by enabling us to see reality differently. Once we see reality differently, our

dispositions, intentions, and motivations also change. Our character is thereby being formed. Read in this way, the Sermon fits comfortably within new covenant piety in which God enables the Christian's character formation between entry into discipleship and departure from this world. If we then want to determine how the Sermon affects Christian decision making, it is necessary to read each individual paragraph in three contexts: the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, the New Testament as a whole, and the Old Testament as a whole.³

NOTES

1 All quotations from ancient Greek and Roman sources come from the Loeb Classical Library.

2 Compare "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32), where "put away anger" means do not hold onto anger (cf. Colossians 3:8 and 1 Timothy 2:8 where the meaning is the same).

3 Appreciation is expressed to the University of South Carolina Press for permission to use material from my book *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).



CHARLES H. TALBERT

is Distinguished Professor of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

The Freedom of Obedience

BY BONNIE BOWMAN THURSTON

Are the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount for all of us, or just the most religious among us? The Sermon calls us to be obedient to God's new revelation, Jesus himself, the now-risen Christ. In free obedience to the Gentle and Humble One, we become as he is.

How to interpret and apply the Sermon on the Mount is not, for Christians, a scholarly question.¹ It meets us where, and how, we live. When all is said and done, when we have studied and prayed our way through the Sermon, what are we to do? Are its teachings for all of us or some of us? Are we to take it literally and live it as the "letter of Jesus' law"? Or is it, as Krister Stendahl suggested, something more like "messianic license," Jesus' permission to act in ways that will undercut social structures, knowing we must face the consequences of our actions?² In short, how do we obey Jesus' teaching in the Sermon because obedience is not optional.

Curiously, "obedience" and "obey" are not words that we hear on the lips of Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), they represent the response of others (for example, the unclean spirits in Mark 1:27 or the winds and sea in Matthew 8:27) to Jesus who is presented as authoritative and thus to be obeyed. Indeed, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount concludes with the editorial comment that Jesus "taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (7:29). That comment is a key to Matthew's Christology, to one of the primary tensions in his Gospel, and to the matter of obedience in the Sermon on the Mount.

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

Matthew presents Jesus as the one who has ultimate authority. His is a very Jewish Jesus modeled on the greatest of Hebrew authority figures, Moses, who went up on a mountain to receive the Law. The reader is expected to remember this when, at the outset of the Sermon, Jesus goes up

the mountain, sits down (the posture of an authoritative teacher), and begins to teach, implying more teaching will follow.

The public ministry of Jesus opens as he delivers a new, authoritative interpretation of Torah. Many New Testament scholars note that the Sermon on the Mount seems structured according to a rabbinic proverb: “By three things is the world sustained: by Law, by Temple service, and by deeds of loving kindness.” This first of Jesus’ five discourses in Matthew (5:1-7:29, 10:5-42, 13:1-52; 18:1-35; 24:1-25:46) – which parallel the Pentateuch, Moses’ five books – presents a summary of his teaching on Law (5:17-48), Temple service – a euphemism for piety (6:1-21) – and proper attitudes and behavior (6:24-7:23). As he records events in the life of Jesus, Matthew highlights his authority by demonstrating how he fulfills scripture and prophecy. “This took place to fulfill...,” Matthew notes. Importantly, at the outset of the section on law in the Sermon on the Mount (5:17-48) Jesus says, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17). God’s law is eternal (5:18), but human understanding of it is both temporal and partial.

Matthew presents Jesus’ interpretation of Torah in what scholars call “antitheses.” The literary pattern is “you have heard/but I say” which presumes the authority to correct a previous interpretation. That Jesus is an authoritative teacher is one of Matthew’s fundamental assumptions. (See, for example, 12:1-8 or chapter 23. In an appendix below I list Matthew’s “Jesus as authoritative” passages.) Similarly the beginning of the section on piety (6:1-21) presumes that Jesus has the authority to correct the conduct of religious practices.

Jesus’ authoritative reinterpretations bring him into conflict with the Pharisees. His encounters with them are a primary source of tension in this Gospel. Because we so often see Jesus confronting them, Christians have a tendency to view the Pharisees as the “bad guys,” but in fact, they were positive figures who helped people understand and live (be obedient to) Torah. Jesus knew this, which is why his suggestion that one’s righteousness must exceed “that of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20) was so shocking to the original hearers. But according to Matthew even Pharisees, perhaps especially Pharisees, do not have Jesus’ understanding. Sometimes religious scholars and the clergy get it all wrong.

OBEYING ‘FROM THE INSIDE OUT’

If, as Matthew asserts, Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of Torah, why doesn’t he explicitly demand obedience? It might be because that tends toward the very legalism the Sermon seeks to dispel. Legalism works from the outside in. Jesus wants people to live from the inside out. At an early stage of development children obey rules because they fear punishment, a primitive motivation to be outgrown. Mature persons live from the inside, from transformed hearts. Christianity is not conformity to externally

imposed rules, but, as the Apostle Paul understood, being “new creatures” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christians are to live from their heart center, from the transformation represented by the “Golden Rule,” the principle and summary of the ethical demands of the Sermon.

This move from outside to inside characterizes Jesus’ antitheses that focus on internal motivation. He quotes a commandment – for example, “You shall not murder” (5:21) or “You shall not commit adultery” (5:27) – then highlights the internal attitude from which that action arises (5:22, 28). The antitheses strengthen the law, but, more pointedly, redirect it. As Hans Dieter Betz has written, “The Sermon on the Mount is not law to be obeyed, but theology to be intellectually appropriated and internalized, in order then to be creatively developed and implemented in concrete situations of life.”³ The Sermon is not law to be obeyed, but theology to be internalized. How? By *hearing*, an idea connected both traditionally and etymologically with obedience, one which the conclusion of the Sermon itself suggests.

Matthew assumes Jesus is authoritative, so Jesus has the right to judge. One characteristic of Matthew’s Gospel is his interest in judgment (see, for example, 10:14-15; 11:22-24; 12:36-42; 13:47-50; 18:34; 21:44; 22:1-14; 23; 25). Thus it is not surprising that the Sermon on the Mount closes with passages which hint at judgment. Take the “interstate,” end up at destruction (7:13-14). Bear bad fruit, be destroyed (7:15-20; cf. 12:33 and 21:43). With regard to the Kingdom of Heaven, don’t assume you’re “in” (7:21-23). These ominous teachings are followed by the summary parable (which children cheerfully sing about, with hand motions, in vacation Bible school) about the wise who build on rock and the foolish who build on sand (7:24-27). Both parts of that parable are introduced

“everyone who *hears* these words of mine” (7:24, 26, italics mine). Those who hear are drawn in, implicated. Once Jesus’ teaching is “heard,” encountered, it sits in judgment on the hearer. Hearing and acting are apparently the point.

Proper hearing is very important, literally foundational (that which is “built

upon”) or grounding, in the Sermon on the Mount. This is consistent with Matthew’s Jesus who commands listening and hearing (11:15; 13:3, 9, 13), blesses ears (13:16-17), interprets the Parable of the Sower in terms of hearing (13:18-23), and commends careful listening to one another (18:15-16). Hearing “refers not only to the physiological act...but also to the wide range of notions describing the understanding of what one has heard,” Betz notes.

Those who hear the Sermon on the Mount are drawn in, implicated. Once the teaching of Jesus is “heard,” encountered, it sits in judgment on the hearer. Hearing and acting are apparently the point.

“In the Sermon on the Mount ‘hearing’ designates the appropriation of tradition....”⁴

In the tradition of Israel, hearing and obeying were practically the same thing. To hear *was* to obey. In Genesis, Abraham gains blessing because he has obeyed God’s voice (22:18). In many Old Testament passages “obey” and “hear” are used synonymously. For examples of hearing and obeying commandments, see Deuteronomy 4:30; 8:20; 15:5; and 28:1-2. The notion that obeying is responding to God’s voice is also clear in the prophets. In the Book of Jeremiah, for instance, to obey and to incline the ear are synonymous (11:8; cf. 3:10, 13, 25; 7:23-24, 28; 11:7; 38:20; and 42:6, 21). The unspoken question is “How could one *not* obey a God whose voice is audible?” This is the premise behind the dramatic first giving of law on Mount Sinai recorded in Exodus 19. There “the Lord called to [Moses] from the mountain,” commanding “obey my voice and keep my covenant” (19:3, 5).

The connection between hearing and obeying was evident to Matthew not only in the tradition of Israel, but in the etymology of the Greek in which most scholars assume he wrote his Gospel. (Although there is discussion of an Aramaic original of Matthew, evidence for it is far from conclusive.) The Greek verb “to hear” is *akouo* and “to obey” is *hupakouo*, a compound of the preposition, *hupo*, meaning basically “under” and the verb “to hear.” To obey is to “listen under.” When I see forms of the word “obey” in Greek, my mind drifts to a picture in the children’s Sunday school department of my home church in West Virginia in which the disciples were at the feet of the teaching Jesus, “listening under” him. “Listening discipleship” is confirmed by definitions in the classic Greek lexicon by Walter Bauer which notes that *hupakouo* suggests following, becoming subject to something or someone, and fully surrendering to it / him or her.

Matthew depicts Jesus as the authoritative teacher. But, even in the section of the Sermon on law, Matthew’s Jesus does not directly demand obedience. Instead, in concluding the Sermon, he prescribes hearing. Obedience in the Sermon on the Mount boils down to this: *to what do you listen?* or *to whom do you attend?* Because Matthew has so carefully depicted Jesus as the Authoritative One, the Gospel narrative itself says “listen to Jesus.” And so, apparently, did the voice of God in the account of Jesus’ Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8).

Like the Sermon, the Transfiguration is a difficult text to interpret and has received much scholarly commentary. But, for our purposes, note that Matthew places it near the middle of the public ministry of Jesus, on another of Scripture’s revelatory mountains (in Matthew alone see 4:8; 5:1; 15:29; 17:1; 21:1; 24:3; and 28:16). Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah (who represent the law and prophets that Jesus has come definitively to interpret and fulfill) to Peter, James, and John – the inner circle of his disciples. Lest Jesus’ radiant appearance or central place with Moses and Elijah be misunderstood by the never-very-acute disciples, the Voice from the cloud (another allusion

to Sinai in Exodus 19) says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; *listen to him!*" (17:5, italics mine). The point cannot be made more clearly: the Voice of Ultimate Authority commands, "Listen to Jesus." He is the Torah to which disciples are to be obedient.

LISTENING TO JESUS HIMSELF

But what do we hear when we "listen under" or "listen to" Jesus? Although Matthew provides five of Jesus' discourses, it may not be primarily the spoken words of Jesus that he thinks require obedience. The danger of being obedient to words, any words, is the danger of legalism which Jesus addresses in the Sermon (5:17-48) and which concerns him throughout his ministry (see 9:14-17; 12:1-8; 15:1-20; 16:5-6; 19:1-12; and the "woes" in chapter 23). In the Transfiguration story, before the Voice speaks, Jesus himself has said nothing, suggesting that "listen to him" means "listen to his *person*," "listen to Jesus, himself," "listen to the Word-made-flesh." When we listen to the person of Jesus, we hear an unexpected song.

Writers in the Hellenistic world did not have the modern preoccupation with personal psychology. Characters in their narratives do not speak at length about themselves, their feelings and motivations. The "I am's" of Jesus characterize the Gospel of John, but are fundamentally metaphorical statements. One of the very few places in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus speaks of himself is in the context of prayer in Matthew 11:25-30, which has been called both the Johannine Thunderbolt and the Gospel of John in miniature. The text is another interesting one, and the history of its interpretation is fascinating.⁵

I suggest that when we listen to the *person* of Jesus in Matthew 11:25-30, what we hear is an invitation to refreshment ("rest" in the NRSV translation of 11:28-29) and a call to gentleness and humility. Many scholars suggest the rest which Jesus offers is to be understood in contrast to the burden of the Pharisees' interpretation of Torah. The Pharisees "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others" (23:4); their yoke is neither easy nor light. Whether 11:28-30 is Matthew's depiction of Jesus as Divine Wisdom (as in Proverbs 1:20ff or 8:1ff) or a Hellenistic "revelation word," whether Matthew echoes Isaiah 49 or 52 or Jeremiah 6:16 or Ecclesiasticus 51, the invitation is to listen and be obedient to Jesus, "gentle and humble." From him one learns what is hidden from "the wise and the intelligent" (the Pharisees?) but revealed to infants (the poor and meek?) (Matthew 11:25; cf. Psalm 37:11).

Of the Synoptic writers, Matthew alone uses the Greek word *praus* for "gentle." It occurs both here in 11:29 and in the beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (5:5). It describes the meek, or tame (as an animal), or unassuming. As a human characteristic the Greeks prized it as a mark of culture and wisdom. It was used of Moses. St. Paul, who says very little explicitly about the person of Jesus, refers in 2 Corinthians 10:1 to

his “meekness and gentleness.” In contrast, the word for “humble” in Matthew 11:29 had negative connotations. It was a slave virtue suggesting servility. No Greco-Roman would aspire to be humble, lowly or poor, of reduced circumstances, undistinguished, even insignificant. In 2 Corinthians 7:6 Paul uses the term for the utterly downcast, downhearted whom God consoles. “Gentle and humble” characterize Jesus in the core of his

“Gentle and humble” characterize Jesus in his “heart,” the locus of thought and volition. This is not only a different sort of person; it is a different sort of God.

being, his “heart,” the center of the person in biblical anthropology, the locus of thought and, interestingly for a discussion of ethics, of volition or will. This is not only a different sort of person; it is a different sort of God, a picture of what Robert Gundry calls “divine gentleness.”⁶

The whole movement of Matthew is toward not only hearing the words of Jesus the authoritative teacher and acting on them, but hearing him, his person, who he is, and responding by becoming like him. To hear Jesus in this way is to offer one’s self to be transfigured. To be obedient to the person of Jesus is to be transformed into what he is: gentle and humble in heart. “It is enough,” Jesus says, “for the disciple to be like the teacher” (10:25).

RECEIVING AN ASTONISHING FREEDOM

Jesus is not antinomian, one who rejects Torah and authority. He said as much in 5:17-19 and reiterates the point in Matthew 23:2-3a: “The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it....” In fact, “the torah of Jesus is more radical than that of the Pharisees....”⁷ It calls not for conformity to legitimate external rules, which is difficult enough, but for the total transformation of a person “from the inside out.” To be obedient to Jesus is to become as he is, humble and gentle. And who wants *that*? Perhaps the very same people whom Jesus’ Beatitudes (5:3-12) bless: the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for all that will “put them right with God” (righteousness), the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted, in short those who are like Jesus as Matthew understands him.

The Sermon on the Mount calls for radical obedience. No wonder “when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching” (Matthew 7:28). The teaching requires that those who hear Jesus be people of a different order. “Countercultural” only scratches the surface of what is intimated.

The assumption is that a fully mature person has emerged whose carefully developed ego is then deconstructed. “Yet before we can surrender

ourselves," writes Thomas Merton, "we must become ourselves. For no one can give up what he does not possess."⁸ Christian humility requires a developed and actualized self that can then be freely offered or given.⁹ Enforced humility is abuse. Freely chosen humility liberates, and especially liberates for service since one is no longer the focus of his or her own concern.

From chosen self-giving which mirrors Jesus' own life (see Philippians 2:6-11) comes the service that fulfills the ethical demands of the Sermon on the Mount. There is enormous relief in being off the center stage of first person singular. An astonishing freedom is offered to those who seek to "hear Jesus" in this way. But for most of us the process involves crucifixion.

The chapter on Matthew's Gospel in Norman Perrin's *The New Testament: An Introduction* is subtitled "Christianity as Obedience to the New Revelation."¹⁰ Exactly so. Obedience is not optional precisely because Matthew's Gospel and Jesus' Sermon call us to be obedient to God's new revelation, Jesus himself, the now-risen Christ. Writing on Matthew 11:25-30 Eduard Schweizer noted that our real problem is the distance of the invisible God to which Jesus brings the solution.¹¹ Finally, then, the Sermon on the Mount offers us the freedom of obedience to the Gentle and Humble One who invites us to himself, indeed, to be as he is. Obedience is not optional because Jesus is not.

APPENDIX: MATTHEW DEPICTS THE AUTHORITATIVE JESUS

- 4:3 The tempter assumes Jesus' authority to change stones to bread
- 4:18-22 Jesus calls men and they follow (cf. 9:9)
- 5:1 Jesus sits down to teach
- 5:21ff. Jesus assumes authority to reinterpret the Law
- 6:1ff. Jesus assumes authority to teach correct religious practice
- 7:21ff. Assumes connection between Jesus and entry into Kingdom of Heaven
- 8:1 Crowds follow Jesus
- 8:27 Winds and sea obey Jesus
- 9:6 Jesus says the Son of Man has authority to forgive sin
- 9:8 Crowd recognizes authority given to Jesus
- 10:1 Jesus bestows authority on others
- 11:4-5 Jesus is associated with the messianic age of Isaiah 35:4-6; 61:1 (cf. Matthew 15:31 and 21:14)
- 11:27 All things given to the Son by the Father
- 12:8 The Son of Man is the lord of the Sabbath
- 12:16 Jesus assumes authority to order others (cf. 17:9)
- 15:1ff. Jesus reinterprets the Law
- 16:6-12 Jesus warns against false interpretation of the Law
- 19:3ff. Jesus' ability to interpret the Law is tested by Pharisees
- 21:6 Disciples are obedient to Jesus' orders

- 21:13 Jesus intimates the Temple is his house
21:23 "By what authority...?" is the crucial question for the Passion narrative
22:15-46 Jesus exhibits authority over Pharisees and Sadducees in the Temple
23:1-3 Question of true authority

NOTES

1 Two accessible summaries of approaches to interpreting the Sermon on the Mount are Amos N. Wilder, "The Sermon on the Mount" (especially Part II, "Interpretation and Relevance") in *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951) 7:155-164; and Harvey K. McArthur, "The Sermon and Ethics," in *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960).

2 Krister Stendahl, "Messianic License," in Paul Peachey, ed., *Biblical Realism Confronts the Nation* (Scottsdale, PA: Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1963), 139-152.

3 Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 15-16.

4 Betz, *Essays*, 4.

5 A summary of classic interpretations of the text occurs in Hans Dieter Betz, "The Logion of the Easy Yoke and of Rest (Matt. 11:28-30)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86:1 (March 1967), 10-24. Although of the New Testament evangelists only Matthew records these words of Jesus, forms of them are found in other early Christian documents—for example: "Jesus said, 'Come to me, for my yoke is comfortable and my lordship is gentle, and you will find rest for yourselves'" (*Gospel of Thomas* 90); and "I have said to you aforetime: 'All ye who are heavy under your burden, come hither unto me, and I will quicken you. For my burden is easy and my yoke is soft'" (95th chapter of *Pistis Sophia*).

6 Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 215.

7 Betz, "The Logion of the Easy Yoke and of Rest (Matt. 11:28-30)," 23.

8 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1958), 29.

9 For more on this idea see chapter 4, "The Kingdom Calls for Humility," in Bonnie Thurston, *Religious Vows, the Sermon on the Mount, and Christian Living* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006).

10 Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974).

11 Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 270.



BONNIE BOWMAN THURSTON

was formerly the William F. Orr Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She now lives in Wheeling, West Virginia, and gives retreats and spiritual direction.

With Ears to Hear

BY RICHARD WARD

When we hear the Sermon on the Mount with ears trained only by a historical perspective, we keep it at a distance from us and our communities. If it is to be Scripture for the Church, then we must find ways to release its capacity to address us as a living word with voice and presence.

*Obey God's message!
Don't fool yourselves by just listening to it.*
The Letter of James

How many times do you think Jesus *preached* the 'Sermon on the Mount'? Once, twice, or more?" the workshop leader asked us. If this would have been a classroom, my hand would have shot up immediately. My training in the seminary had given me an answer that had served me well in my own ministry: "There was no particular moment in history when Jesus preached the Sermon in this form," I might have said. "Rather, the 'Sermon' represents a compilation of materials drawn from oral and literary sources traced to the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. It's Matthew's sermon, really, shaped from the traditions he had received and aimed at the needs of his own community."

That's the perspective I had to offer. I knew it would set me at odds with the 'literalists' among us but that is not the reason I hesitated to speak it. There was another reason my hand stayed in my lap. The leader's question was having a very different effect: it was taking us out of our familiar ways of experiencing the Sermon on the Mount as print and shifting to its orality. When that happens, other kinds of questions arise.

While my answer might have been 'correct' according to some, it dangerously succeeds in keeping the Sermon on the Mount safely ensconced as an artifact in a distant corner of history. A yawning gap opens between our examining how this text might have been put together *back then* (whether it

was actually preached once by Jesus on some Galilean hillside and faithfully transcribed by a disciple, or assembled by an obscure believer in Antioch named “Matthew” (struggling with issues in his own community) and our exploring how the Sermon on the Mount should shape the life of the believing community *in the here and now*. If we listen to it with ears trained only by this historical perspective, we will keep the Sermon on the Mount at a dis-

What is at stake is how the Church performs the Sermon—not simply how we speak its words in the sanctuary, but how we perform its way in the fabric of human community.

tance from us, our communities, and the moment in time in which we are living. If this bit of text—three chapters and about 111 verses—is to become more than a curious artifact, if it is going to become more than a dim light flickering from a distant past, if it is going to become Scripture

for the Church, then we must find ways to release the Sermon’s capacity to address us as a living word with voice and presence.

The emerging discipline of performance criticism can help us listen for and respond to a living word in Scripture.¹ This approach to studying the Bible reminds us that what is at stake is how the Church performs the Sermon on the Mount—not simply how we speak its words in the sanctuary, but how we perform its *way* within the intricate fabric of the human community. Performance criticism does not silence all other interpretive strategies; in fact, in this form of criticism a number of historical and linguistic methodologies converge and find fuller expression. For instance, when we listen to the Sermon, we will hear echoes of performed interpretations within the shared memory of the Church. These living memories can incite and inspire a wide range of performances yet to be seen and heard.

HEARING A SERMON WE’VE NEVER HEARD

Chances are you have never *heard* the Sermon on the Mount read. You have heard excerpts read from it in public worship and perhaps you have read it through a time or two personally (in silence). You certainly have heard sermons that orally interpret it and apply its meanings (in congregations that follow one of the lectionaries, it shows up every three years during the season of Epiphany). Countless books and articles talk about the Sermon and address its significance to the Church as if it were a famous and revered relative sitting quietly in the center of the room.

We talk about it as if it was a sermon, yet our experience of it bears little resemblance to listening to a sermon. Sermons are oral interpretations of biblical texts that give those texts voice and presence in the community by talking about them. Texts like these do not just speak by themselves; they

require the inflection and interpretation afforded by human agency – voice, thought, gesture, and bodily presence – in order to be heard. Usually the agent of interpretation is a preacher who through the sermon generates an oral experiential event, a performed and embodied interpretation of a text, theme, or topic. This “live” transaction between a preacher and a community of listeners in the context of worship brings the resources of Christian tradition to bear on human experience. We know how to listen to a sermon.

But would we even want to listen to the Sermon on the Mount from start to finish? Based on our prior experiences of listening to brief excerpts of the Bible read in worship, the prospect of hearing this much of it read aloud would send many of us scurrying for the sanctuary exits. How could listening to these words attributed to Jesus have much aesthetic merit or ethical value? We have these doubts, I suspect, because our habits of reading aloud rarely allow a text to ‘come alive’ in our hearing. Why is that? It is because *a particular way of hearing the text has been normalized by our liturgical practices.*

For so long both scholars and the Church, for the most part, have neglected the oral/aural roots of biblical texts that we no longer value them as material for performance. We have come to think of biblical texts as silent things that are read and studied in solitude, if at all. When they are given voice, the preferred style of reading tends to flatten affect. In the sincere effort to regard the holy ‘otherness’ of sacred texts and honor the values of the silent, individualized print culture of Protestantism, we have obscured Scripture’s capacity to speak more fully to our human predicament.

Yet the times are changing. Our culture is being transformed by the rapid development of electronic and digital technologies which are decentering writing and print as the primary vehicles for communication. Our standards for “good speech” are changing. Who patiently listens to flat, uninflected, and unexpressive voices anymore when our ears are tuned for energy, conviction, and authenticity? Especially when we think we already understand what is being read to us. Even our notions of “texts” and “reading” are changing; in a sense, they are returning to their first meanings. Dennis Dewey reminds us that the word “texts” originally referred to the spoken word, as in “weaving a tale” or “spinning a yarn.”² Reading (aloud) and listening are being valued anew for the complex activities they are – the comprehension of a gestalt of oral, visual, and kinetic messages that move and flow through our consciousness.

When we are listeners and readers in our communications culture, we draw closer to the situation of our early Christian ancestors’ experience of Scripture. Performances were at the center of the emerging church’s interpretation and appropriation of its developing scriptural traditions.

SHAKING UP OUR HABITS

The performance critic shakes up our habits of reading and listening to Scripture in two ways: by constructing performance scenarios of the early

church and by offering us visions for performing Scripture in our settings. Drawing upon a history of the performance of literature and employing performance conventions of theatre, storytelling, and oral interpretation, the performance critic sets out to create performed interpretations of Scripture appropriate for *our* hearing. Sometimes a person will read a text with attention to the emotional and cognitive affect of its language and structure. In

Performed interpretations were at the heart of the early Christians' experience of Scripture. Through performance the Church felt addressed by its Sovereign.

other performances, some one may "internalize" the language and form of the text and speak its meaning "by heart."³ Both sorts of performers can present the text as being the Scripture of the Church, as words that are Word-bearing for the gathered assembly.

They will believe the text *authorizes* the performed

interpretations they render, and they will work from some notion of authorial intentionality (believing that Someone behind the text makes it to be authoritative Scripture).

The performer's goal is to "re-oralize" or "transmediaize" the biblical text in the manner of ancient performers, to step into the place of personae in the text and to speak as if their words, attitudes, thoughts, and perspectives were the performer's own.⁴ When a performed interpretation is done well, it is an effective bodying-forth of the thoughts, imagery, and actions found in the text. It restores for listeners a sense that the text is speaking directly to them, just as it spoke to its original audience.

The Sermon on the Mount is a text that was readily performable in antiquity. Its performance would have been a lively affair, full of animation, expression, and movement. Imagine interruptions and exclamations, heads shaking and frowning responses, laughter and long periods of silent attention. Perhaps these ancient performances took place in the afterglow of fellowship around a table where a communal meal had been shared. Perhaps the text as we find it in Matthew's Gospel is representative of a performance history of this material. As oral commentaries and explanations of this material emerged, they might enter the mix and become the more formal modes of speech we call "homilies" or "sermons."

Performed interpretations (as described above) were at the heart of the early Christians' experience of Scripture; they helped to shape the minds, hearts, and memories of believers in relation to Christ. Performance was the agency through which the early Church experienced the lively presence of its Living Lord; performance blurred the line between the Jesus in the text who speaks to disciples in the presence of a crowd gathered on "the moun-

tain” and the Jesus made present in the performed interpretation of the text. Through performance the Church felt addressed by its Sovereign.

A performed interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount will conduct listeners on a journey through the entire text. This journey not only will take us back to a Galilean hillside where Jesus is addressing his disciples in a distant, idyllic past, it will lead us forward to the threshold of what Warren Carter has called “the empire of heaven,” which breaks in whenever we practice what the Sermon preaches!⁵

The journey begins with an act of speaking and listening (Matthew 5:1-2) and moves through widening fields of relationships – first between a rabbi (teacher) and his disciples and then out into the “crowd,” that is, into the realm of everyday, ordinary affairs. We are reminded that the journey will take us through a “narrow gate” (7:13) and that along the way there are dangers and distractions. We can expect persecutors and revilers (5:11), “evildoers” who may strike, sue, or impress one into service (5:39-41). “Enemies” are forever present but so also are the practitioners of a shallow, showy piety, who trivialize the performance of devotion through hypocritical prayer, fasting, and generosity (6:2-4). Such shallow behavior is characteristic of false prophets who seduce the unwitting and vulnerable disciples into illusion, deception, and inauthentic religious practice.

Many phrases remind us that this way of being in the world goes against the grain of conventional behavior and piety. We hear repeatedly, for example, “You have heard it said, but I say to you.” Imperatives everywhere punctuate the Sermon with the sound of confidence and authority. If such notes strike postmodern hearers as the arrogant and self-righteous tune of a bygone age, there are equally confident assurances of Divine Presence along the way, signs that the God of Israel, Jesus, and the Church recognize the struggles of the pilgrim on this path and promise blessedness to those who continue. Virtues practically forgotten in our imperial consciousness – humility, “good” grief that arises out of empathy and compassion, devotion to God, and a passion for making things right – are singled out, honored, and affirmed in God’s commonwealth. Those who practice them are “salt” and “light” (5:13-14), people who live with serious attentiveness and regard for relationships, both human and divine.

UNDERSTANDING THE SERMON

Too often our ears are tuned to hear the Sermon on the Mount as “bland, cliché words of comfort” which disguise the radical economic and political implications of its practices.⁶ Or the more morally earnest among us may hear only a judgmental tone as the imperatives come at us like one-two punches to the gut. The Sermon’s high-minded moral code seems out of reach – way up on the pantry shelf that is nearest to heaven. This verse certainly does not help: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). The whole listening project may shut down right there.

A high school friend of mine was an earnest young man, but his adolescent faith rested on a literal interpretation of the biblical texts. When he came to this verse, bereft of the benefit of critical studies, he threw up his hands and walked away from the Christian faith altogether! Who could be so presumptuous as to assume the “perfection” of God for oneself, he wondered. When read in uninflected voice and without theological insight, these

Why do we perform the Sermon—to make it more entertaining, to call attention to a virtuoso performer? These miss the mark. We perform this text in church to evoke performance of Scripture as the life of the Church.

words put the Sermon further out of reach, for in English “to be ‘perfect’ means to be entirely without fault or defect,” and we simply cannot be this way and remain human.⁷ The credibility of the entire text is on the line in how we perform this one verse.

Yet in the faithful performance of this verse is the key for listening to the entire Sermon. It can lead

us out of bondage to guilt and defeatism, and into freedom from the social and political systems that keep us locked in fear, privilege, entitlement, and self-absorption. Elements of the text that have been rendered silent and fixed by the print medium can be released into new horizons of meaning through the agency of the human voice and body. So what would a faithful performance of this text look like?

To the performer of any text, “perfection” cannot be reduced to “getting it right” by sounding all the words in their proper order. Indeed, in one of its literal meanings the word “performance” means to perfect, “to carry through to completion.” What is completed through the performance of a text is the thought and intentionality that the performer experiences in relation to the text and carries its *affect* through to completion through sound and gesture. Perfection involves the performer interpreting for an audience in a winsome way what the text means to the performer. But a “finished” performance is never the end of the process of interpretation; it is richly evocative, calling for other interpretations that open up echoes, resonances, interrogations, and appropriations. In the realm of performance, then, “perfection” has the open-ended, evocative quality of an invitation.

Now, consider the Sermon again in light of this meaning of “perfection.” The entire text, punctuated as it is by commands or imperatives, is oriented toward the future. So a better rendering of “Be perfect” is “You will be perfect.” Matthew 5:48 is an invitation to imitate or “carry through to completion” God’s own divine actions.⁸ Just as an informed performance critic is invited to “imitate” the language, thought, and attitude suggested by the

text and “finish” it through an embodied interpretation, we who listen to the Sermon on the Mount are invited to perform a salty, light-bearing way of life that imitates God’s love. The final form of the performed interpretation of this text must be the work of an *ensemble*, the gathered community of God, and not the labor of a solo interpreter.

BECOMING AMATEURS

Performing the Sermon on the Mount can restore a sense of immediacy to our aural experience of the text and build a bridge to the ways that our Christian ancestors experienced it. A bodying-forth of the thoughts, ideas, images, and metaphors interwoven through this text helps us feel addressed by its words. When a performer learns the Sermon “by heart” for our sake as listeners, she models for us a way of committing ourselves to the text and to the Lord who speaks through it to his disciples. Through her performance, the Sermon’s upside-down wisdom makes an immediate claim on our attention.

But what is the purpose of the performance: to make the text more entertaining and our listening more enjoyable, to call attention to the work of the virtuoso performer? Such performed interpretations miss the mark. That mark is the presentation of “a prophetic, covenantal vision for the life of the community in the new empire of heaven.”⁹ The reason we perform this text in church is to evoke performance of this Scripture as the life of the Church.

The final form of the performance of the Sermon on the Mount is not by a small group of virtuosos who are committed to bringing the words of Scripture to life through performance. What brings the Scripture to life in the human community that God loves is the performance of God’s gospel by salty, light-bearing *amateurs*—literally, “ones who love”—who find themselves stumbling through a narrow gate into the empire of heaven.

NOTES

1 David Rhoads coined the term “performance criticism” in his article “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 36:3 (Fall 2006), 118-133. With Thomas E. Boomershine, Joanna Dewey, and others, Rhoads was inspired to build this methodology by Nicholas Lash’s idea that “the fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of scripture is the performance of the biblical text” (Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* [London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1986], 42).

2 Dennis Dewey, “Great in the Empire of Heaven: A Faithful Performance of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount,” in David Fleeer and Dave Bland, eds., *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007), 69-83. See 173, note 2.

3 On the distinction between memorization and internalization, and the different processes involved in preparing performances based on these, see Dewey, “Great in the Empire of Heaven,” 74ff.

4 Thomas E. Boomershine has coined the words “re-oralize” and “transmediaize” in his many lectures and workshops.

5 Quoted by Dewey, "Great in the Empire of Heaven," 78.

6 Ibid.

7 For this insight I am indebted to Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 61.

8 Hare, *Matthew*, 61.

9 Dewey, "Great in the Empire of Heaven," 81.



RICHARD WARD

is Associate Professor of Preaching and Performance Studies at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.

From Galilee He Preaches Still

BY ANN BELL WORLEY

From Galilee he preaches still, the everliving Christ;
come all who thirst for righteousness and heed his words of life:
how blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,
the poor in spirit, and the meek, the earth and heav'n are theirs.

You are the salt, you are the light, to glorify your God;
be perfect as your Father is: do everything in love.
Make peace when others anger you; turn the other cheek;
forgiving those who've wounded you, go love your enemies.

Do not store treasures on the earth, and do not flaunt your faith;
in secret shall you fast and pray and give your wealth away.
Don't worry what tomorrow brings; fear not for your life;
for God, who keeps the birds and fields, will all your needs provide.

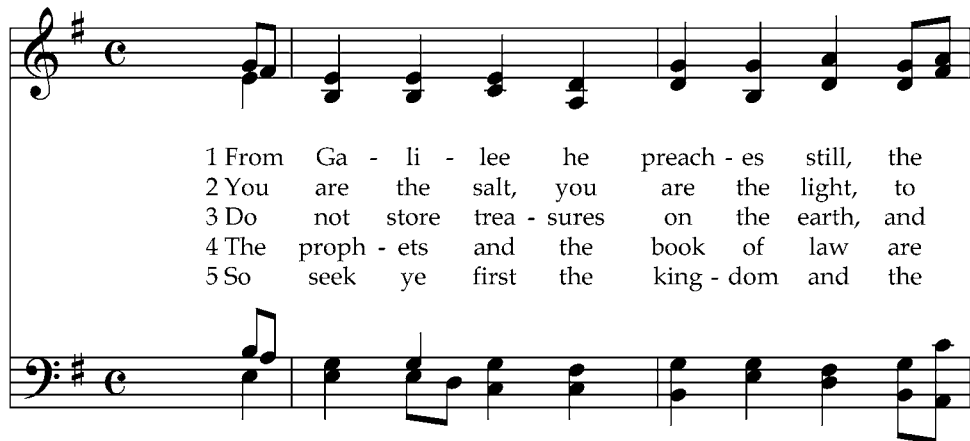
The prophets and the book of law are met in Jesus' rule:
in all things do to others as you would have done to you.
The wider gate and easy road will lead unto death,
but narrow is the path to life for those whom God has blessed.

So seek ye first the kingdom and the righteousness of God,
then act upon these words of Christ, all you who have been called.
Ask and it shall be given you; search and you will find;
knock and the door will open to the everlasting life.

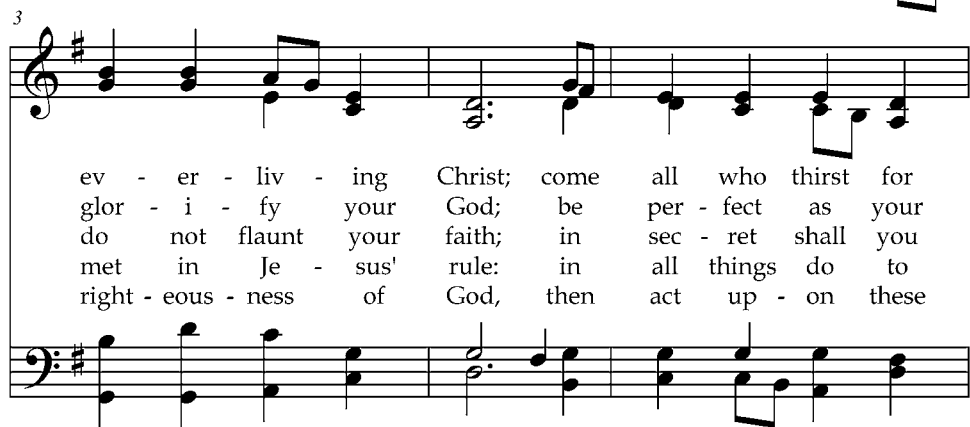
From Galilee He Preaches Still

ANN BELL WORLEY

ARR. RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS



1 From Ga - li - lee he preach - es still, the
 2 You are the salt, you are the light, to
 3 Do not store trea - sures on the earth, and
 4 The proph - ets and the book of law are
 5 So seek ye first the king - dom and the

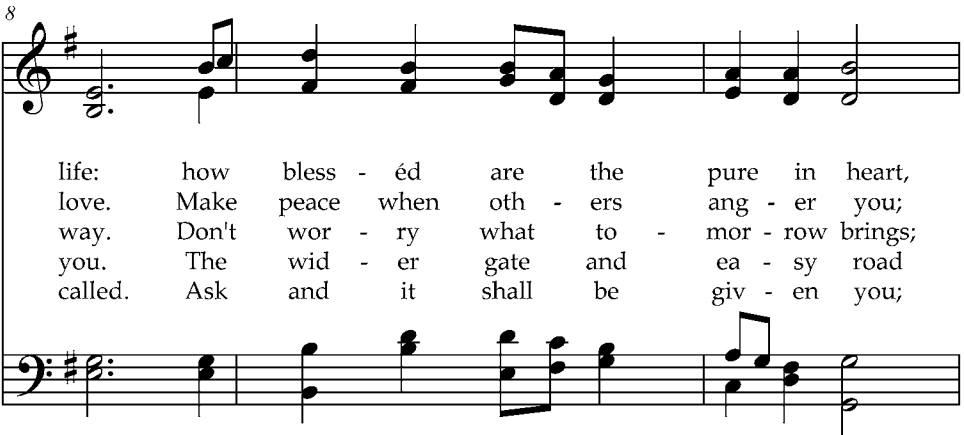


3
 ev - er - liv - ing Christ; come all who thirst for
 glor - i - fy your God; be per - fect as your
 do not flaunt your faith; in sec - ret shall you
 met in Je - sus' rule: in all things do to
 right - eous - ness of God, then act up - on these



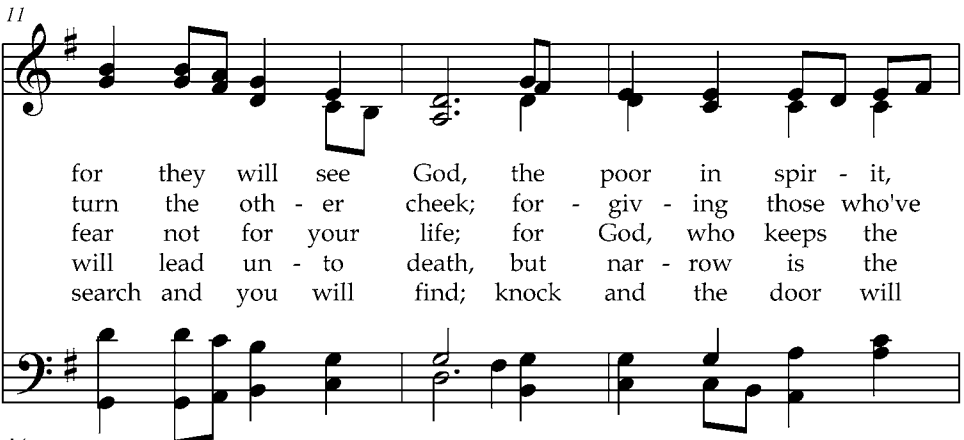
6
 right - eous - ness and heed his words of
 Fath - er is: do eve - ry - thing in
 fast and pray and give your wealth a -
 oth - ers as you would have done to
 words of Christ, all you who have been

8



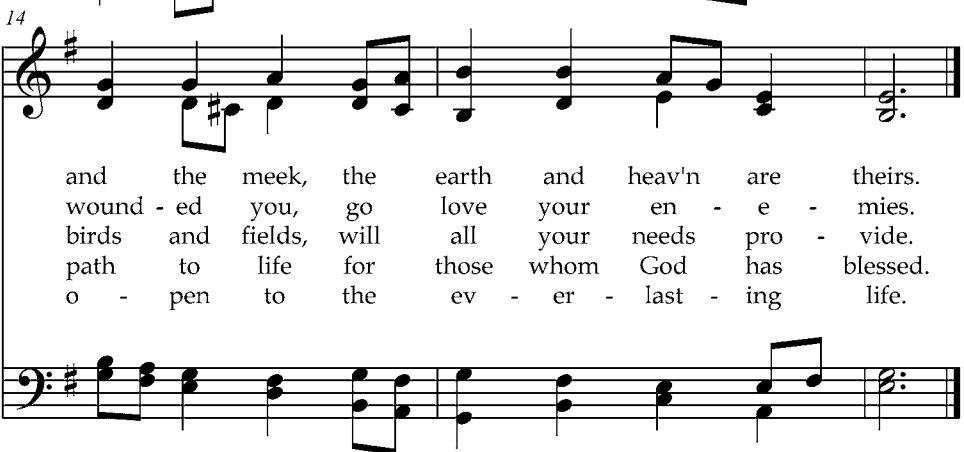
life: how bless - éd are the pure in heart,
 love. Make peace when oth - ers ang - er you;
 way. Don't wor - ry what to - mor - row brings;
 you. The wid - er gate and ea - sy road
 called. Ask and it shall be giv - en you;

11



for they will see God, the poor in spir - it,
 turn the oth - er cheek; for - giv - ing those who've
 fear not for your life; for God, who keeps the
 will lead un - to death, but nar - row is the
 search and you will find; knock and the door will

14



and the meek, the earth and heav'n are theirs.
 wound - ed you, go love your en - e - mies.
 birds and fields, will all your needs pro - vide.
 path to life for those whom God has blessed.
 o - pen to the ev - er - last - ing life.

Worship Service

BY ANN BELL WORLEY

Prelude (Organ or Guitar Medley)

“Just As I Am,” “I Surrender All,” and “My Jesus, I Love Thee”

Silent Meditation

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. 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.

Matthew 4:23-25

Tolling of Bells

(The bell tolls twelve times, representing Jesus' call of the twelve disciples.)

Call to Worship: Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“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.”

Invocation

O God, you have turned our world upside-down through the life and teaching of Jesus. Awaken us now to your blessing. Open our ears that we might hear. Stir our hearts that we might act to glorify you in all things, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Processional Hymn

“All Glory, Laud, and Honor”

*All glory, laud, and honor, to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.*

You are the King of Israel, and David’s royal Son,
now in the Lord’s name coming, our King and blessed One!

Refrain

The company of angels are praising you on high,
creation and all mortals in chorus make reply:

Refrain

The people of the Hebrews with palms before you went;
our praise and prayer and anthems before you we present:

Refrain

To you, before your passion, they sang their hymns of praise;
to you, now high exalted, our melody we raise:

Refrain

As you received their praises, accept the prayers we bring,
for you delight in goodness, O good and gracious King!

Refrain

Theodulph of Orleans (750-821); trans. John Mason Neale (1818-1866), alt.

Tune: ST. THEODULPH

Greeting

The Sermon on the Mount is the largest collection of Jesus’ teachings in Scripture. The teachings were not delivered all at once but were woven together as a unified whole in the Gospel of Matthew. Beginning with the well-loved Beatitudes, the Sermon walks us through Jesus’ teachings on the law, worship, and the practice of faith, and concludes with a series of warnings and an admonition to act upon the words of Jesus. Our service of worship progresses through each of these broad movements, creating space to reflect upon the teachings and to practice what Jesus preached.



THE LAW: MATTHEW 5:17-48

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;
I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

Matthew 5:17

Antiphonal Reading: based on Matthew 5:21-45

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder,' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

"But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

"But I say to you that everyone who looks at a person with lust has already committed adultery in the heart.

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows that you have made to the Lord.'

"But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven or by the earth. Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No,' 'No.'

"You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

"But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek also.

"You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

Readers 1 and 2: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Hymn

“The God of Abraham Praise”

The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above;
the ancient of eternal days, the God of love!

The Lord, the great I Am, by earth and heaven confessed,
we bow before your holy name, forever blessed.

Your Spirit still flows free, high surging where it will;
in prophet’s word you spoke of old, and you speak still.
Established is your law, and changeless it shall stand,
deep writ upon the human heart, on sea or land.

You have eternal life implanted in the soul;
your love shall be our strength and stay, while ages roll.
We praise you, living God! We praise your holy name;
who was, and is, and is to be, fore’er the same!

*Daniel ben Judah, (c. 1400); trans. Newton Mann (1836-1926) and
Max Landsberg (1845-1928), alt.*

Tune: LEONI

Homily: On the Law



WORSHIP: MATTHEW 6:1-18

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them;
for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Matthew 6:1

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18, 5-9a

Jesus said: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put

oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. [*Choir standing*]

“Pray then in this way:

Choral Interlude (A Capella)

“The Lord’s Prayer (Traditional)”¹
Charles Winfred Douglas (1867-1944), alt.
Tune: PLAINSONG

Homily: On Worship

Hymn

“Eternal God, May We Be Free”²

Eternal God, may we be free
from false pretense and foolish pride;
help us your perfect will to see,
and cast unworthy thoughts aside.

From worship that is insincere,
with shallow words and thoughtless prayer,
may we be free, your voice to hear,
and then respond with newfound care.

O God our Father, we confess
an unconcern for those in need;
break through our sinful selfishness,
and reign as Lord of word and deed.

Renew our lives that they may be
alive and vibrant to your call,
with ears to hear and eyes to see
new ways to crown you Lord of all.

Michael G. Dell
Tune: CANONBURY



PRACTICING THE FAITH: MATTHEW 6:19-7:12

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;
for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 7:12

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:19-24

Jesus said: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Offertory Piano or Organ Meditation

"Seek Ye First"³

Karen Lafferty

Responsive Reading: Matthew 6:25-33

Jesus said: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.

"Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

"Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

"Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

"And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

"But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"

“Therefore do not worry, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’

“For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:1-12

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

Homily: On Practicing the Faith⁴

Communion

Youth Choir Anthem

“Blest Are They”⁵

David Hass

Prayer

In this act, O God, we remember Jesus, who showed us the way to life through his own life and death. May we continue to feast on his words, to love your law, to honor you in our worship, and to practice our faith to your glory, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Hymn

“From Galilee He Preaches Still”

Ann Bell Worley

Tune: KINGSFOLD

(pp. 35-37 of this volume)

Benediction: from Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Amen.

Organ Postlude

Reprise: “Just As I Am,” “I Surrender All,” and “My Jesus, I Love Thee”

NOTES

1 The Lord’s Prayer (Traditional), *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1985), service music S 119.

2 Eternal God, May We Be Free, *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), hymn 299. Words copyright © 1986 by Broadman Press (SESAC) (admin. by LifeWay Worship Music Group). All rights reserved. Used by permission

3 Seek Ye First. Words and music: Karen Lafferty. Copyright © 1972 Maranatha! Music. Phone: 800-245-7664. Web site: www.maranathamusic.com.

4 This homily should include reflection on the warnings at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:13-29).

5 Blest Are They (SAB, keyboard, G-2958). Words and music: David Haas; vocal arrangement: David Haas and Michael Joncas. Copyright © 1986 GIA Publications, Inc., 7404 S. Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638. Phone: 800-442-1358. Web site: www.giamusic.com.



ANN BELL WORLEY

is a freelance writer in Chicago, Illinois.



Vibrant hues of blue, yellow, and green draw us into Laura James' simple but iconographically rich image, which invites us to reflect on the universality of Christ and his teachings.

The Universality of Christ and His Teachings

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

In *Sermon on the Mount* (on the cover) we can enjoy the colorful and iconographically rich work of the Brooklyn, New York, painter Laura James. As an artist of Antiguan heritage, her artistic inspiration traces not only to the Bible stories read to her as a child but also to her personal research of Ethiopian Christian art. This illustration—originally produced as the central image for *The Year of Grace 2005* church calendar—finds its power to teach through color, line, and form. The composition immediately attracts the eye with its bold blues, yellows, and greens.

The artist portrays Christ as a person of color in order to emphasize the ecumenical appeal of the gospel. James recalls that the illustrated Bible story books she knew as a child depicted the biblical figures in a way that did not look like her. Later, as she studied Christian iconography, she encountered the Ethiopian art that would have a profound impact on her understanding of Black history and the foundations of her faith. Christianity was practiced widely in Ethiopia by the fourth century and the tradition of Ethiopian Christian art dates back to the early fourteenth century. In this rich tradition she appreciated the depiction of Black people in the Bible stories.

James has had solo shows in New York City at The American Bible Society, Museum of Catholic Art and History, and Union Theological Seminary. Major Christian denominations, especially the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, have commissioned her paintings. She believes these churches are extremely committed to engaging communities of color. The critical praise and popular reception of her illustrations for *The Book of the Gospels* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2002), a volume designed for the public proclamation of the Gospels during Mass, inspired James to produce *Sermon on the Mount* for a church calendar project. This image, like those in *The Book of the Gospels*, marks a change in the traditional style of painting used to illustrate important biblical narratives.

Dedicated to creating images that teach with simplicity and focus, James draws us to her images through vibrant color and easily recognizable narratives. By portraying a Black Christ, she invites children of the next generation of Christians to reflect on the universality of Christ and his teachings.

This photograph is available
in the print version of
Sermon on the Mount.

Just as Jesus employed striking verbal images in the Sermon on the Mount to make his teachings come alive, so Cosimo Rosselli and other artists who designed the Sistine Chapel's frescoes sought to teach truths of faith through artistic representations.

Teaching through Images

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

When Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere) commissioned the building of the Sistine Chapel in the papal residence, he called on Cosimo Rosselli to paint several frescoes (paintings on wet plaster) on the long north wall of the chapel. The unusual dimensions of the room—approximately 134 feet long by 44 feet wide and 68 feet tall—recall the shape of Solomon’s Temple (as described in 1 Kings 6:2). The chapel is dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin and functions as the pope’s private chapel and the location of the conclave to select each pope. The north wall contains scenes from the life of Christ which parallel the life of Moses frescoes on the south wall. At the time of Rosselli, the chapel’s flattened barrel vault ceiling depicted a starry sky; some thirty years later, between 1508 and 1512, Michelangelo painted images from the Book of Genesis there.

In addition to *The Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Leper*, Rosselli was responsible for *The Last Supper*, *The Crossing of the Red Sea*, and *The Giving of the Law* frescoes. Rosselli—a Florentine artist who had developed his painting skills in the company of fellow artists in the workshop tradition and then continued as a master alongside Sandro Botticelli, Pietro Perugino, and Domenico Ghirlandaio—completed these frescoes between July 1481 and May 1482. A younger contemporary, Piero di Cosimo (1462-1521), assisted him in painting *The Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Leper*.

This fresco is an iconographically traditional representation of the narrative frame for the Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel of Matthew records that “great crowds followed [Jesus]” as “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” (4:24-25). Matthew depicts Jesus as a ‘new Moses’ who teaches the people: just as Moses had received God’s commandments on Mount Sinai, so Jesus “went up on the mountain” (5:1) to deliver a ‘new law’ which does not destroy the law or the prophets but fulfills them (5:17). In Rosselli’s composition, Jesus stands on an elevated hill wearing a red gown and blue mantle with his right hand raised in a blessing gesture. Though the apostles in the distance stand in rapt attention, the people in the foreground vary both in their dress and attention span, it seems! Some of them wear contemporary fifteenth-century clothing, in contrast to the Roman drapery worn by Jesus and his first-century followers. Most of the figures are captivated by

Christ's words, but two prominent figures in the foreground (one of whom has his back to Christ) are in a conversation of their own. We do not know the identity of these two men or their conversation topic. None of the figures are well drawn—they have small heads and somewhat elongated bodies. The use of large drapery for clothing may indicate that the artists had poor anatomical drawing skills.

The Gospel says that “when Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him,” and this is when Jesus heals a man with leprosy (8:1-4). Once again Matthew stresses the continuities between Moses and Jesus, for Jesus instructs the man, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (8:4). In the lower right of the composition Rosselli depicts Christ a second time: now closely followed and watched by his twelve disciples, he heals a kneeling man who suffers from leprosy.



When, in 1994, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*—the marvelous painting on the altar wall—and other frescoes in the Sistine Chapel had been cleaned and restored to their glorious power and color, Pope John Paul II noted in celebration of the occasion, “The frescoes that we contemplate here introduce us to the world of Revelation. The truths of our faith speak to us here from all sides. From them the human genius has drawn its inspiration, committing itself to portraying them in forms of unparalleled beauty.”†

The pope called attention to this sacred place in which the many paintings, like the images in an illustrated book, serve to make scriptural truths more understandable. Just as Jesus employed parables and striking verbal images in the Sermon on the Mount to make his teachings come alive for the people, so Rosselli and the other artists who designed the Sistine Chapel's beautiful frescoes sought to teach through artistic representations. In this worship space, the truths of our faith surely do speak to us from all sides.

NOTE

† Pope John Paul II, “Homily at the Mass to Celebrate the Unveiling of the Restorations of Michelangelo's Frescos in the Sistine Chapel” (April 8, 1994), available online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19940408_restaurisistina_en.html.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

is Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

You Are Blessed

BY BURT L. BURLESON

To the crowd on the Galilean mountainside, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are "You are blessed." This is where it always begins—with God's grace coming down from this mountain. If we cannot get this, then we cannot get Jesus. We can spend a lifetime hearing those words.

Matthew 5:1-11

The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' first sermon in the Gospel of Matthew, begins with the Beatitudes. It is kind of like Jesus opening his preaching with a poem, which—as they taught us in seminary—is not a bad way to begin. Though he starts with a poem, what follows is not mere three-points-and-a-poem sermon. It is a dazzling and brilliant teaching that we cannot grab hold of. It grabs hold of us.

We experienced that at a "lectionary breakfast" several years ago when a few members from DaySpring Baptist Church gathered at a downtown Waco restaurant to help me think through the lectionary readings for the week and prepare this sermon. The Beatitudes were in charge of us. Someone said, "They are beautiful and musical." And so they are—blessed are..., blessed are..., blessed are.... "They are comforting in their rhythm, and sort of lull you at first." Another pointed out, "Yeah, sort of like a children's song, they invite me in but then they really unload." "Like a knife in me that's being turned," a third added. That prompted a lot of heads nodding "amen" and someone confessing, "I am not like any of this yet. I cannot check off any of these."

That is the way it began among my friends. Our conversation just kept bouncing wildly off the text and our lives, back and forth.



It is not hard to imagine this text bouncing around in an ancient congregation. Perhaps members are gathered in a simple living room in AD 70 – not a fun time for Christians. In many ways their commitment to Christ is not paying off. They know plenty of persecution and isolation and rejection. They do not go home for the holidays anymore. Being followers of The Way has provided no insulation. Their lives are full of everything lives are full of – they still get sick, lose loved ones, and deal with difficult people. They are not so blessed.

Though Jesus never promised them any insulation from life's troubles, still they are wondering. It is just human nature to figure if you are following the right savior, then you are going to get some blessing, some payoff. But they are dying from this and that plague just like everyone else. In addition they are members of a despised sect, ridiculed on a good day. So they wonder if they are doing it right, getting it right, believing it right.

Where is God's blessing? The question burns in the hearts of these first-century believers who have snuck off for another worship service. Their leader pulls out a scroll that has just arrived and reads this part of Matthew's new Gospel. They listen to the Beatitudes with the curtains drawn, for they are hiding.



Whether you are in a lectionary breakfast in Waco, a first-century house church in Antioch, or among the crowd of people that follows Jesus "up on the mountain" and hears him speak this blessed poem, who you *are* makes a difference in what you *hear*.

The crowds who follow Jesus through Galilee, Matthew tells us, are ill in all sorts of ways: they are suffering from severe pain, demon possession, seizures, and paralysis (Matthew 4:24b). Jesus' congregation is pretty much the walking wounded, if they are walking at all. And in the midst of their suffering, not only is human instinct telling them the gods must not be pleased with them, their religious culture teaches them "If you are ill, there must be a skeleton in your spiritual closet." Even his own disciples, when they meet a blind man, ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). The fellow must be paying for something. Someone has broken a commandment, someone has come up short on a Levitical list that determines who has been naughty or nice, and now he is suffering because of it.

So Jesus' congregation "on the mountain" is suffering not only from every sort of disease, but also from the deep suspicion that God does not like them and is making that apparent in their twisted bodies and disordered thoughts. Whoever has God's blessing, it is not them.

“When he saw the crowds,” Matthew begins his account of the Sermon. This is no incidental transition, but an insight into God with us. Jesus *saw them suffering* outside and in, and when he did, he went up on the mountainside.

Luke says Jesus “came down with them and stood on a level place” (Luke 6:17), but Matthew says he “went up the mountain; and...sat down.” This is not just “You say *po-TAY-to*, I say *po-TAH-to*.” Matthew, the evangelist who writes with an eye towards the Jews, has this new teacher go up the mountain, because the old teacher, Moses, went up the mountain to bring down the law. Jesus is about to give them his law, so he goes up on a mountainside to sit down and say, “Let me tell you about who has the blessing of God.”



That is the big word in the Beatitudes: blessing! The Living Bible substitutes “happy.” Do not even go there. This is not about us getting happy. It is about who is blessed of God, and *blessing* in the Bible is miles beyond *happy* in Hallmark.

Recall the story of Jacob tricking his dying father Isaac into giving him the blessing rather than his older brother, Esau (Genesis 27:1-40). Later, Esau is beside himself and he goes to his father, unbled. “Don’t you have one for me?” he pleads to Isaac. But his father doesn’t, and Esau’s weeping could be heard all over. To be unbled is worth weeping about. Blessing gives us something we cannot get for ourselves. It comes as a gift from

another and we need it. We know if we have it and we know when we don’t—the painful weeping is impossible to miss. The blessing is core deep and deeper. It penetrates. It is not, “I sure like the way you color, son.” No, it is, “I like *you*. There’s a gleam in my eye when I look at you.”

And that is what this poem is about first. Those people on a mountainside in Galilee—who were suffering, and those disciples gathered in a first-century living room—who were wondering, and my friends at the lectionary breakfast—who were bouncing ideas around, hear this teacher who is come from God say, “You are blessed.” Those are the first words out of Jesus’ mouth. “You are blessed if you are spiritually poor, if you do not have it together spiritually. You are blessed of God.” It is

Jesus’ congregation “on the mountain” not only suffers from every sort of disease but also deeply suspects that God does not like them and is making that apparent in their twisted bodies and disordered thoughts.

amazing that this beatitude is next: “You are blessed if you mourn – if you have lost what seems like everything. You have God’s blessing.”

Don’t you know that Jesus was still seeing the crowd, looking individuals here and there in the eye as he said, “Blessed are you and you and you. You are blessed, if you are meek, if you have no power.” What was it like for them to hear this word, this good news? “You have God’s blessing. You who are starving for righteousness, who need it so much and feel like you have not eaten in years.” “You are blessed,” he kept saying. “You are blessed.”

The crowd heard it on a mountainside in Galilee, the first-century disciples heard it in their shuttered rooms, and my friends and I heard it around our lectionary breakfast table. Are you hearing it now? “You have God’s blessing – what you need most, what is essential to live.” It is not because of anything you are or have done or will do. It is simply yours.



Jesus sees us and we hear him say, “You are blessed.” This is where it always begins. It has to begin here with God’s grace coming down from this mountain. If we cannot get this, then we cannot get Jesus. This teaching is amazing and exasperating. We can spend a lifetime hearing it.

Once you really hear the Beatitudes, this sermon starter begins to bounce around in your life like it did at our lectionary breakfast table. You may see a great vision (as one of us said) “dangled by God in front of the community, challenging us to something beyond us. Be this way.” Or you may find a path that changes who you are from the inside out – a contemplative path where you see your spiritual poverty and emptiness, where you embrace suffering, where your hungers and passions are transformed, where you practice forgiveness over and over and over. Or you will look out a window (as one of us did) to see a person going through the trash can by the window and you will ask, “Can I even get this, without getting to the bottom of life? Is the gospel so bottom up, so inverted, that I have to go *there?*”

You will find yourself thinking, “Jesus calls me to be a peacemaker. He calls me to mercy. He wants me to hunger for righteousness and justice.” The Beatitudes bounce around and challenge us to live like Jesus in our world, in our relationships. And having heard – core deep and deeper – that you are blessed of God, you will find yourself caring about everything else that Jesus said that day on the mountainside. What is more, you will seek it – meekness, peace, humility, mercy. Knowing that you have God’s blessing, you will live a life of blessing.



The Beatitudes that Jesus shared are his self portrait. They depict one blessed of God who lives a life of blessing in the world. One who sees a vision of another way of being and invites us to see it and live it with him.

On that hillside by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus described for us a blessed life. On another hillside outside of Jerusalem, on Golgotha, he showed us what it is. Matthew records that ironically it was a Roman soldier and his friends who recognized the truth, "Truly this man was God's Son" (Matthew 27:54).

Each time we come to the Lord's Table for Communion, we are saying "Yes" to Jesus' teaching that we are blessed, and we are declaring our desire to take that blessing into the deepest part of who we are, to internalize Christ and his gospel in ways that change us forever.

In mystery and words beyond our comprehension, Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you...unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood...you have no life in you.... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 3:53-56).

"Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (Matthew 26:26-28).



BURT L. BURLESON

is University Chaplain at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Blessedness

BY JOY JORDAN-LAKE

To say that God chose to walk on earth among the lowly makes for quaint nativity scenes and lovely hymn lyrics, but what if Jesus still chooses to move among those from whom we would most like to distance ourselves?

He's such a redneck," my brother David muttered, recounting some latest antic of a middle school teammate who came from the 'back side' of our Tennessee mountain hometown.

The eager little sister, I nodded. "Yeah, what a redn—"

"We *don't*," our mother scolded from the kitchen, "call people 'red-necks.'"

So David repeated, louder this time, his teammate's behavior, uncouth and crude.

Backing big brother up, I snickered.

"Yes," our mother called over the pop and splatter of frying chicken, "but we *don't* call people 'rednecks.'"

My brother and I exchanged glances that said simply, *why the heck not when that's what someone just is?*

Our mother's linen closet shelves bore labels every eight inches: fitted twin sheets, baby blankets, pillowcases.... Labels were how you knew what you were dealing with, weren't they? A fitted twin sheet or a first-cabin redneck. It was helpful to know.



Over the years, my brother grew a compassionate heart and began a professional life in Washington, D.C., where he polished a politically correct vocabulary which mostly excludes the term *redneck*.

I, on the other hand, began my professional life in Boston, where I quickly learned that I was one: a redneck of the first order.

I first understood I was an inbred, backwater hick when I moved to New England. True, I started life in the North with a southern accent, a too-

big '80s blonde perm, a Tennessee license plate, a favorite pair of fringed, cut-off shorts, and a deep discomfort in and around shoes.

Still, it irked me when Bostonians, after they had gotten an earful of my accent, would ask, enunciating slowly as one speaks to preschoolers and the not-very-bright, "where *in the South* are you from?"

So I tried to instruct my northern friends in the differences between The South and The Redneck South (since my mother was a thousand miles out of earshot). I spoke of the home of my childhood best friend, whose parents quoted Shakespeare at the dinner table, whose walls displayed African masks, and whose bedside tables boasted recent issues of *The New Yorker*. I distinguished between the kinds of southerners who listened to "Dixie" on the horns of pickups and the kinds who, like my mother, prefer Wagner to Vince Gill.

In the face of assumptions that labeled all southerners as Beverly Hill-billies and Bull O'Connors, I defended myself with even more labels, by sorting people into discernible types: *Us* and *Them*.



Yet, surely more than any story of a god's contact with mortals, the earthly appearance of Jesus messed with categories of Us and Not Us. This God chooses a young woman not for urbane sophistication or status, but for her spirit of servanthood and her pluck. Jesus' mother, Mary, was not remotely part of the respectable middle class.

There is the tough-to-explain-to-the-neighbors prenuptial pregnancy, the donkey ride to Bethlehem where nobody's giving this couple the time of day (much less a room), and the barn that serves as maternity ward. The stuff of *Very Not Us*.

From November through January every year, a hand-painted nativity scene graces my dining room: it is the romantic Hallmark-card scene we all treasure. No manure clings to the tails of the camels or sheep. None of the shepherds are missing teeth or a shave. The Wise Men, handsome and pleasantly racially diverse, have arrived a couple of years ahead of schedule in order to be included in the ceramic casting. Slender, well-manicured ceramic Mary has lost all her pregnancy flab while Joseph appears well-rested and calm, as if he has been helping deliver babies who are not his and laying them in cattle troughs every day for the past year.

I love this nativity scene.

Yet the real scene must have been far more disturbing: the truth is, the shepherds in that culture were several social rungs below rednecks – if you'll forgive my using the word.

From what biblical scholars tell us, shepherds as a social group did not *choose* watching sheep as a professional calling so much as they were already on the run from the majority culture: outcast, uneducated, crude,

and more than a little murky on personal hygiene. *Abiding in the field* was where the townspeople preferred them. Shepherds were people who could not afford the double-wide mobile homes of their richer kin and so slept outdoors with the sheep.

These were a people who were not well-traveled, well-read, or well-bred—both boorish and boring. In the poem “At the Manger,” one of W. H. Auden’s shepherds comments that they have “walked a thousand miles yet only worn / the grass between our work and home away.”



Just yesterday, my own middle school child startled me.

“He’s *such* a loser,” she concluded a story to her younger brother, who chortled, and nearly choked on his grapes.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “What a los—”

“We *don’t*,” I called from the kitchen, “call people ‘losers.’”

A room away, I could not see their two faces, but I still knew their glances said how Mom did not get how some people just *were*.

“Got *that*?” I called in to the smirks.

“Yes, ma’am,” they quickly called back.

Middleschoolers function much the same way as adults, don’t they? Is it that we never quite outgrow our childhood tendencies to divide the rocks we have collected into igneous and metamorphosis and the people we know into winners and losers, into nice people *without* rusted-out cars in front yards and, oh, rednecks? Or do children learn from adults about the thrills of categorization: the rich and the poor, the majority and minority race, the educated and uneducated?

Jesus, the gospel writer Luke wants us to hear, comes into this story of a minority-culture, surely illiterate, Nobody girl. An angel announces she is highly favored by God.

Then a whole sky of angels shows up to a group of loser-rednecks in the fields, just them and their stench and their pasts and their flasks. Then the heavens are blazing and ringing with song, and the shepherds choke on their wads of tobacco and trip over their bottles of Jack Daniels and shake in a huddle together. And then they are all sobbing, just like you and I would be, because they are so scared, and so amazed.

Because the God who tossed the planets in place has just announced that for those made in the divine image, the old labeling systems will no longer work. Except for one word.

“Blessed,” says Luke, quoting the baby born in the cow barn who grows up to be Jesus, “blessed are the poor.” *Blessed*.

Blessed are you who scrape together the dollars and dimes to buy groceries, to take a feverish child to the doctor.

Blessed are you when your appearance—skin color, gender, or the tattered rags of your past—has caused wrong assumptions about who you are.

Blessed.

Because: God sees. God cringes. God weeps. God lowers the gavel.

Because God has shown up in flesh in a way that announced with one heaven of a public address system that if there is any partisanship in the eternal realm, it's on the side of the crowd who is misunderstood, who never yet got their fair share. But *will*.

The truth is, this good news is appalling news, really, if we are still at the table dividing our rocks and our stamps and the people we know. If we have got ourselves in the box with the gemstones, the wealthy, and the winners. The Arrived. The Accepted.

The news is horrific if we have got ourselves at the top of the food chain, and someone just upended the chain.

The gospel becomes good news only if we have somehow wised up and lumped ourselves alongside the losers and strugglers, or alongside those who have somehow, at some point, messed up. It is good news only if we know the inside story about who we are, despite all that the outside world thinks we have achieved.

Good news: to all of us rednecks and losers left out of the loop and to all of us with the lingering stench of old sins, the done and not-done.

There are in the same country, shepherds. Fear not.

For unto us is begun a hierarchy turned on its head. A mixing up of the segregations. A muddling up of the social classes.

A messy, glass-all-over-the-road kind of collision of Us and Them.

Not exactly what we were hoping?

Maybe that's why it is a command: *Fear not*.

For unto us rednecks and losers who have discovered we bear the image of God, us screw-ups who have become the breath-knocked-out-of-us grateful, unto us who fall with our faces to the frozen scraggly field, unto us *blessed* is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.†

NOTE

† This article is adapted from my book *Why Jesus Makes Me Nervous: Ten Alarming Words of Faith* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007). Used by permission of Paraclete Press, www.paracletepress.com.



JOY JORDAN-LAKE

is a writer and visiting lecturer at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee.

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-

The night we read the Beatitudes, a man from the homeless shelter got excited.

“Jesus is talkin’ to us, man! We’re the one’s who are crying and hungry and thirsty. Jesus says we’re blessed!” He became my teacher as I listened to Jesus’ words in his context.

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

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” Jesus said. The desert Christians 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.

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.

**JONATHAN WILSON-HARTGROVE**

is cofounder of the Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina, where he directs the School for Conversion.

Jesus Is for Losers

BY SHANE CLAIBORNE

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” Folks are hungry for a Christianity that mirrors Jesus, not the judgmentalism that has done more to repel than to woo people towards God’s grace.

A few months back as I was getting ready to speak to a group of folks, the pastor approached me beforehand to point out that a couple of gay men were sitting on the front row, holding hands. He felt the need to point it out. “Are you going to say something about that, about homosexuality?” he whispered. I laughed, and said, “I’m not sure what you have in mind. I could begin by saying I praise God that they felt welcome enough to come into this place, that I am glad they are here.” That is not what he had in mind.

I wondered to myself, following his logic, if he would then want me to ask everyone who had been divorced and remarried to stand up so we could give them a little firm rebuke. In fact, maybe we should just station folks at the doors of the church like bouncers in clubs—sort of a sin patrol. They could ask people as they enter the building: “Have you been prideful or greedy this week?” And we could bounce all the nasty sinners out of the service. We’d be left with much smaller crowds to deal with. In fact I would probably end up preaching to a small handful of proud saints, whom I could point my finger at, call them all liars, and tell them to leave as well. What in the world has become of us?

I can remember talking with a homeless guy in an alley downtown and he started sharing with me about God. He was familiar with the Bible, but kept talking about “those Christians” in the third person and at a distance. A little confused, I finally asked him for clarity, “Are you not a Christian?” “Oh no,” he said, “I am far too messed up.” I asked him what he thought a

Christian was, and he said, "Someone who's got their [you know what] together, and has things figured out." I confessed that I must not be a Christian either (and that I was not sure I had ever met one), and we laughed. We read together where Jesus tells the Pharisees (the ones who had things together): "It's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but the sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32, NIV).¹ My homeless friend nodded with a smile: "I like that verse."

A VIEW FROM THE COMPOST OF CHRISTENDOM

Some years back, a friend and I prepared a multimedia video clip for a worship service. Our goal was to capture people's impulsive response to the word "Christian," so we hit the streets with a video camera from the trendy arts district to the posh suburbs. We asked people to say the first word that comes to mind in response to each word we said and we'd go down a list to break the ice: "snow," "eagles" (it's Philly), "teenagers," and finally "Christian." When people heard the word "Christian," they stopped in their tracks. I will never forget their responses: "fake," "hypocrites," "church," "boring." One guy even said, "used-to-be-one" (sort of one word). I will also never forget what they did *not* say. Not one of the people we asked that day replied "love." No one said "grace."

We have a lot of work to do. A recent survey of young adults outside Christendom showed that the three most common perceptions of Christians are *anti-homosexual* (an image held by 91 percent of the folks surveyed), *judgmental* (87 percent), and *hypocritical* (85 percent).² How sad that the things for which Jesus

scolded the religious elites around him are the very labels now placed on Christians. We have a major image problem.

Growing up, I was always told, "Good people go to church." So I did — sometimes complaining, sometimes tired, but always smiling. Good people did go to church. And then I looked around and watched

the news, and found a Church full of sick people and a world that had some decent pagans. My studies taught me that the more frequent a person's church attendance, the more likely they were to be sexist, racist, anti-gay, pro-military, and committed to their local congregation.

No wonder people get confused. I heard one preacher say, "Jesus needs some good lawyers, because he's been terribly misrepresented." We live in

We asked people, "What comes to mind when you hear the word 'Christian'?" I will never forget their responses: "fake," "hypocrites," "church," "boring." One guy said, "used-to-be-one" (sort of one word). No one replied "love." No one said "grace."

an age that when people hear “Christian,” they are much more likely to think of people who hate gays than people who love outcasts, and that is a dangerous thing. Bumper stickers and buttons read “Jesus, save me from your followers.” Over and over I saw people rejecting God because of the mess they saw in the Church. As contemporary author and ragamuffin Brennan Manning says, “The greatest cause of atheism is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door and deny him with their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

The world watches closely as evangelical Christians point their fingers at homosexuals only to be exposed later for sexual immorality themselves. Will the recent scandals – like the one involving Ted Haggard, former head of the National Association of Evangelicals – lead us to more condemnation or to the humble beating of our chests (for we are people in need of community and grace) and the acknowledgement that all of us are better than the worst things we do? Can we see the ironic hypocrisy of our evangelicalism where the divorce rate has surpassed that of the larger society, while we continue to accuse homosexuals of destroying the family? God have mercy on us sinners.

But I am very hopeful. There seems to be a new kind of Christianity emerging – a Christianity that is closer to the poor and broken people forsaken in the abandoned shadows of the empire. Folks are hungry for a Christianity that mirrors Jesus, not the judgmentalism that has done more to repel than to woo people towards grace.

Whenever someone tells me they have rejected God, I say, “Tell me about the God you’ve rejected.” And as they describe a God of condemnation, of laws and lightning bolts, of frowning gray-haired people and boring meetings, I usually confess, “I, too, have rejected that God.”

I have met a lot of Christians who say, “If people knew all my struggles and weaknesses, they would never want to be a Christian.” I think just the opposite is true. If people really knew what idiots we are, in all our brokenness and vulnerability, they would know that they can give this thing a shot too. Christianity is for sick people. Rich Mullins used to say, “Whenever people say, ‘Christians are hypocrites,’ I say ‘Duh, every time we come together we are confessing that we are hypocrites, weaklings in need of God and each other.’” We know that we cannot do life alone, and the good news is that we do not have to; we are created for community.

Bono, the great theologian (and decent rock-star), said it like this: “The fact that the Scriptures are brim full of hustlers, murderers, cowards, adulterers, and mercenaries used to shock me. Now it is a source of great comfort.”³ Consider King David, who many Christians remember as “a man after God’s own heart.” Well, David breaks just about every one of the big Ten Commandments in two chapters of the Bible (and this occurs *after* he has answered God’s call): he covets, commits adultery, lies, and murders.

Yet he is still one of the losers whom God trusts and uses. Matthew's Gospel gives us a genealogy of Jesus that could compete with any of our family trees on the dysfunctionality-meter. One of my favorites is when Matthew gets to the part of the genealogy that involves David's infamous sex scandal with Bathsheba, he writes: "David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife" (Matthew 1:6b, NIV). Ha! He names other women in the lineage, but when he gets to Bathsheba, he makes sure that we all remember everything that went on there (David had Uriah killed). What a mess! So if that is the Son of God's lineage, none of us can be too bad off. No wonder people are always asking about Jesus, "Who is this? Isn't he the carpenter's kid from Nazareth?" (Matthew 13:55).

BEWARE THE YEAST OF THE PHARISEES

We may be drawn together by isolating ourselves from evildoers and sinners, creating for ourselves an identity of religious piety and moral purity. Or we may be drawn together by joining with the broken sinners and evildoers of our world who are crying out to God, groaning for grace. Both of these are magnetic and contagious.

Jesus tells a parable about two men praying in the Temple. The Pharisee boasts of his religious devotion and moral obedience, thanking God he is not like other sinners. The tax collector, on the other hand, stands at a distance and dares not even look up to heaven. He beats his chest and pleads, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." It is he, not the Pharisee, who goes home justified before God (Luke 18:9-14).

The "yeast of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:6; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1) is still infectious, and it attacks both "liberal" and "conservative" Christians alike. Conservatives stand up and thank God they are not like the homosexuals, the Muslims, and the liberals. Liberals stand up and thank God they are not like the war-makers, the yuppies, and the conservatives. The causes are different, but the self-righteousness the same.

We may be drawn together by isolating ourselves from evildoers or by joining with the broken sinners of our world who are crying out to God, groaning for grace. Both of these are magnetic and contagious.

Jesus did not come simply to make bad people good. Jesus came to bring dead people to life. We can be morally "pure" but devoid of any life, joy, or celebration. I have seen this in myself and in many people I know. For some, purity means that they not touch anything "secular." For others, it means eating only "organic" food. But if our commitments are not born out of relationship, if they are not liberating for both oppressed and oppressor, and if

they are not marked by raw, passionate love, then we do little more than flaunt our own purity by showing everyone else how dirty they are. If there is anything I have learned from floating in circles of liberals and of conservatives it is this: you can have all the right answers and still be mean. And if you are mean, no one will want the truth that you have found.

The infection of Pharisaic self-righteousness can lead us to think it is

When we have new eyes, we can look into the faces of those we do not even like and we can see the One we love. We can see God's image in everyone we encounter.

our duty to rid the world of evildoers. But history shows that the more voraciously we try to root out evil by force, the more it escalates. The more passionately we love those who do violence, the more evil will diminish. This was true of the Christian martyrs, whose self-sacrificial love for their enemies con-

verted many to the Church. Christianity has spread most rapidly when believers have suffered persecution without retaliating. Today, as our 'Christian' nation claims to be rooting out evil with violence, it is no surprise that terrorist activity is escalating, and Muslims are less open to Christianity than they were a year ago. For every Muslim extremist killed, another is created.

"What do you think of that man?" the old guy asked in a raspy voice as I settled in next to him on the plane. He pointed to the face of Saddam Hussein on the front of his newspaper with a headline story of his looming execution. I gathered myself and prepared for what could turn out to be a rather chatty plane ride. I replied gently, "I think that man needs some love." The boisterous gentleman sat still; it was, perhaps, not exactly the response he predicted. Then he said pensively, "Hmmm. I think you're right." In a forlorn tone, he whispered, "And it is hard to communicate love through a noose."

It is scandalous to think that we have a God who loves murderers and terrorists like Saul of Tarsus, Osama bin Laden, or Saddam Hussein—but that is the good news, isn't it? It's the old eye-for-an-eye thing that gives us pause. But the more I have studied the Hebrew Scriptures, the more I am convinced that this was just a boundary for people who lashed back. As the young Exodus people are trying to discover a new way of living outside the empire, God makes sure there are some boundaries—like if someone breaks your arm, you cannot go back and break their arm and their leg; if someone kills hundreds of your people, you cannot kill 160,000 of theirs.

We have learned the eye-for-an-eye thing all too well. A shock-and-awe bombing leads to a shock-and-awe beheading. A Pearl Harbor leads to a

Hiroshima. A murder leads to an execution. A rude look leads to a cold shoulder. "An eye for an eye" we have indeed heard before. But Jesus declares in his State of the Union/Sermon on the Mount address, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,'" but there is another way (Matthew 5:38). No wonder Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the people did not know "the things that make for peace" (Luke 19:42).

Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., used to say, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves the whole world blind" (and with dentures). John's Gospel tells the story of a group of people who drag forward an adulteress and are ready to stone her, as the law required (John 8:3-11). When they seek Jesus' support for this death penalty case, he responds, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." He might well have said, "You are all adulterers. If you have looked at someone lustfully, you have committed adultery in your heart." The people drop their stones and walk away with their heads bowed.

Today we want to kill the murderers, and Jesus says to us: "You are all murderers. If you have called your neighbor 'Raca,' or 'Fool,' you are guilty of murder in your heart" (cf. Matthew 5:21-22). Again the stones drop. We are all murderers and adulterers and terrorists. And we are all precious.

When we have new eyes, we can look into the faces of those we do not even like and we can see the One we love. We can see God's image in everyone we encounter. As Henri Nouwen puts it, "In the face of the oppressed I recognize my own face and in the hands of the oppressor I recognize my own hands. Their flesh is my flesh, their blood is my blood, their pain is my pain, their smile is my smile."⁴ We are made of the same dust. We cry the same tears. No one is beyond redemption and no one is beyond repute. And that is when we are free to imagine a revolution that sets both the oppressed and the oppressors free. The world is starving for grace. And grace is hard to communicate with a noose.⁵

In *I and Thou*, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber contrasts how we can look *at* people simply as material objects (as merely an "it"), or we can look *into* them and enter the sacredness of their humanity such that they become a "Thou."⁶ Most of the time we look *at* people—good-looking women or men, beggars, pop stars, white folks, black folks, people with suits or dreadlocks. But over time, we can develop new eyes and look *into* people. Rather than looking at people like sex objects or work tools, they become sacred. We can enter the Holiest of Holies through their eyes. They can become a "Thou."

I have an old hippie friend who loves Jesus and smokes a lot of weed, and he is always trying to get under my skin and stir up a debate, especially when I have innocent young Christians visiting with me. (The problem is, he knows the Bible better than most of them.) One day, he said to me, "Jesus never talked to a prostitute." I immediately went on the offensive: "Oh, sure he did," and whipped out my sword of the Spirit and got ready to spar.

Then he just calmly looked me in the face and said, "Listen, Jesus never talked to a prostitute because he didn't see a prostitute. He just saw a child of God he was madly in love with." I lost the debate that night.

GOD USES ASSES

Rich Mullins used to say, alluding to the story in Numbers 22:22-40, "God spoke to Balaam through his ass, and God's been speaking through asses ever since." It follows that if God should choose to use us, we need not think too highly of ourselves. And we should never assume that God cannot use someone else, no matter how ornery or awkward they appear to be.

A buddy of mine who is a youth minister told me about a trip he took with a bunch of teenagers to one of those "mountaintop" spiritual retreats with lots of tears, confessions, and spiritual goose bumps. On the way up, the van had a flat tire — of the worst kind: it was in the rain, there were no tools, and the spare tire was flat. As all the kids stared out the window, his temper escalated and he lost it. My friend started yelling, cussing, and kicking the blessed thing. Finally, he was able to get the van going, climbed back in, and told everybody to shut-up and leave him alone for a bit. With a lot of embarrassment and a few snickers from the back of the van, they continued on to the retreat. It was the same as every year, with worship, preaching, and an altar call. But then something crazy happened. One of his toughest kids from the ghetto told him the week after they returned home that he had given his life to Jesus. My friend was stunned and asked him to explain how it happened, "Was it the messages, the altar call?" The young man said, "No it was on the way up when I saw you cussing at the van. I thought, 'If he can be a Christian, I can give this thing a shot too.'"

So many people are longing to be brought to life. They know all too well that they have done evil. They long to hear not only of a God who embraces evildoers but also of a Church that does the same.

History is filled with movements of people who cry out to God that they are unholy, who identify and confess their sins, who beat their chests before each other and God — from Europe's confessing church to the U.S. college revivals that began by humble acknowledgement of sins. One of the most powerful things the contemporary church could do is begin confessing our sins to the world, humbly get on our knees, and repent for the terrible things we have done in the name of God.

In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, my friend Don Miller tells the delightful story of how he and friends dressed like monks and set up confessional booths on their notoriously heathen campus. But the great irony was that they were confessing their sins as Christians and the sins of Christendom to anyone who was willing to listen and forgive.⁷ I think the world would be willing to listen to a Church on its knees, one that doesn't pretend to be perfect or have all the answers. A mystical, sacramental healing would begin within us and could extend into the wounds of our world.

TOWARD A GENTLER REVOLUTION

We have become so polarized in our society. Hatred and anger seem to dominate our talk, no matter which political or social or religious side we are on. Friends at the Camden House, a sister community to The Simple Way that is just across the river in Camden, New Jersey, did something beautiful. They each dressed in sackcloth, branded with one of the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—fruits that most revolutions are starving for. And then they walked into the middle of the strident Iraq War protests in Philadelphia, a witness of the Spirit to both the warmongers and Bush-bashers. That is the sort of thing that makes us laugh and nudges us all a little closer to God.⁸

One night a couple of my housemates snuck into my room carrying a life-size poster of President Bush hugging a little girl. They climbed up on my bunk and hung it on the ceiling, just a few feet above my bed. I came in late that night. My roommate was already asleep, so I crawled into bed in the dark, oblivious to it all. The next morning the first thing I saw when I awoke was George W. Bush staring me dead in the eye and nearly laying on top of me. Now that's funny. I have deliberately left the poster there so I see him every night when I go to bed and each morning when I get up. For some folks that would give them nightmares, for others it would help them to rest secure. For me it reminds me that President Bush is human, neither the anti-Christ nor the Savior, and that allows me to sleep well.

We need more prophets who laugh and dance. In our living room we have the quote often attributed to Emma Goldman: "If I can't dance then it is not my revolution." Whenever people talk about injustice, there is usually a looming cloud of guilt. Joy and celebration usually do not mark progressive social justice circles, or conservative Christian circles for that matter. That is one thing many conservatives and liberals have in common: they lack joy.

But the Jesus movement is a revolution that dances. Celebration is at the very core of the Kingdom. That celebration will make its way into the darkest corners of our world—the ghettos and refugee camps, the palaces and prisons. May the whispers of hope reach the ears of hope-hungry people in the shadows of our world.

NOTES

1 Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

2 David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 27.

3 Bono, "Introduction," *Selections from the Book of Psalms: Authorized King James Version*, Pocket Canons (New York: Grove Press, 1999).

4 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 34th anniversary edition (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2006), 87-88.

5 My reflection on the execution of Saddam Hussein first appeared online in "Shane Claiborne: Communicating Through a Noose," *God's Politics: A Blog by Jim Wallis and Friends* (January 4, 2007), at blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2007/01/shane-claiborne-communicating-through.html.

6 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971). As one who immigrated to Palestine to advocate for Arab-Jewish cooperation, Buber knew all too well how easily we can objectify and demonize others.

7 Donald Miller tells the story in chapter 12, "Confession: Coming Out of the Closet," *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.), 113-128.

8 The women in several of the communities in Philadelphia organized a similar witness at a March for Women's Rights that had a polarizing counterdemonstration of pro-life activists. They went as bridge-builders to permeate the walls between the groups and talk with people on both sides.



SHANE CLAIBORNE

is a founding partner of The Simple Way community in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The World Is Thus

BY GREGORY A. CLARK

In the Sermon on the Mount we confront our real problems—the anger, lust, greed, lies, egoism, nationalism, and militarism that shape our modern identities, demand our loyalties, and threaten our true and lasting joy. Three recent books allow the Sermon to reorient our imaginations and recall us to Christ’s different gospel.

In the film *The Mission* (1986), the new Portuguese rulers in eighteenth-century South America order an attack on a Catholic community of Guarani people and the Jesuit priests who are protecting the tribe from enslavement. After the massacre, Cardinal Altamirano, a papal envoy who failed to convince the Jesuits to withdraw from their remote mission, confronts a government official:

Altamirano: And you have the effrontery to tell me that this slaughter was necessary?

Hontar: I did what I had to do. Given the legitimate purpose, which you sanctioned...I would have to say, yes. In truth, yes. You had no alternative, Your Eminence. We must work in the world. The world is thus.

Altamirano: No, Señor Hontar. Thus have we made the world...thus have I made it.¹



Context is everything. The context in which we place the Sermon on the Mount determines what it says to us, and it would seem reasonable to place the Sermon in the context of the gospel. So, what is the gospel?

According to a common account, the gospel is the claim “Jesus saves!”

He saves the individual soul from hell, from sin, and from a guilty conscience. But also, because we cannot save ourselves, Jesus saves us from legalism and merit-based systems of earning our way into heaven. That is, Jesus saves us from Judaism.

The Sermon on the Mount has never fit easily into this framework. After all, it appears to offer a set of laws to Jesus' disciples. Salvation by faith is barely mentioned.

But what about when Jesus says, "You have heard it said.... But I say to you"? Is he not claiming to replace Judaism? And consider the Beatitudes: are they not meant to reduce us to despair at earning our way to heaven?

As it turns out, the answer is "No." Judaism is not what Christians have thought. Scholars now tell us there have been Judaisms of many kinds, and Christianity was originally thought of as one of these, not as a separate "religion." What Charles Talbert notes of Matthew's Gospel applies to early Christianity generally: "Matthew's separation is separation *within* Judaism, not *from* it" (p. 7). Moreover, the practices of Judaism that existed at the time of Jesus and the apostles were not legalistic attempts to earn salvation. They were, rather, responses to a loving God who has freely and mercifully elected them. This reevaluation results from some of the most important scholarship of the previous generation, a reevaluation morally necessitated by the widespread Christian support for the National Socialists prior to and during World War II. That support had theological underpinnings reflected in the account of the "Jesus saves" gospel noted above. Christians should never have said, and they ought no longer to say, that Jesus saves from Judaism.

Each of the three books on the Sermon on the Mount reviewed here exerts considerable effort to show how the Sermon stands in continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures and commentaries. Glen Stassen situates the Sermon in the book of Isaiah, and both Charles Talbert and Dale Allison have at their fingertips a wealth of Jewish sources. This feature alone commends each one of these books to the reader. But each work also moves in its own distinctive direction.

Charles Talbert, in *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004, 148 pp., \$17.99), reads the Sermon as a critique of legalism, understood as the assertion of imperatives without grace. We do not find legalism, he says, in the Jewish call to covenant faithfulness, in the Mediterranean world of the philosophers, or, most especially, in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon does not offer laws or rules for decisions, "except indirectly." Rather, it aims to reshape the character of the hearers/readers through the grace of "verbal icons." A text functions as a verbal icon when "one looks through the lens of the command into the divine will behind the text. Such a vision of God and the divine will is transformative for those who see" (p. 77). Only secondarily and in an indirect way does the Sermon provide guidance for decision making.

Talbert does not often provide historical or hypothetical examples of what these transformed characters might look like, so when he does, it is worth our attention. He gives an example in the context of considering Matthew 5:38-42, “do not retaliate against one who is evil.” Consider two people, one without a transformed character and taking Jesus words as law, and the other with transformed character having been shaped by the verbal icon. Each character witnesses the mugging of the man in the story of the Good Samaritan. The one who takes Jesus’ words as law “would likely have waited until the attack was over, the robbers gone, and then made his way to the victim.... However, he would have acted improperly, because love of the neighbor was not central to his behavior.” By contrast, “a character shaped by the Matthean Jesus’ priorities...would likely have taken his staff, cuffed the robbers about their ears and driven them off, and then gone to the man.” Thus, “there may be occasions when love of neighbor trumps one’s commitment to non-retaliation” (p. 92).

The illustration left me with a flood of questions: Who are these people? What are their home communities? Are those communities built with their principal aim as maintaining covenant faithfulness? How did that person with the transformed character learn to wield that staff so well? And who carries a staff anymore?

As I write this we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1957. And so, I cannot help but allow my mind to wander and wonder. Perhaps the person being beaten is a Civil Rights marcher. Perhaps the people beating him are members of my own community, with whom I speak and eat and attend church on Sundays. Now, who is my neighbor? And to whom am I to be a neighbor? Why did good Christian people not defend those marchers? Surely, it was not that the bystanders were pacifists. Why did those marchers not defend themselves – or the demonstrator next to them? Surely, it was not that the demonstrators were legalists. Why wasn’t anyone handy with a staff anywhere near?

Until we are told more about the specific faith community in which their actions and characters are rooted, I do not see how it is possible to tell what actions followers of Jesus would perform or how their actions are related to the words of Jesus. Talbert’s notion of a verbal icon can usefully free up a text from simplistic, legalistic readings. Verbal icons can be effective, even necessary, tools for teaching and for shaping character. However, they cannot perform the task in isolation from actual,

Christians should never say that Jesus saves from Judaism. These three books show how the Sermon stands in continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures and commentaries.

living communities that reflect upon and reflect back those icons.

Among the many virtues of Dale Allison's *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, 176 pp., \$19.95) is attention to how our native communities situate our interpretive strategies.² This feature of his work adds depth to his reading. If we locate readings in communities, we can no longer simply distinguish between

Legalism and literalism are not the greatest threats to understanding the Sermon. The antagonists in Glen Stassen's view are "the human effort to make ourselves perfect" and the "backwash from the Enlightenment. . . that does not expect God to do new things."

the theological and the political. Rather, Matthew "at the very least" indicted some of the political movements of his day (p. 96). Further, Allison's cognizance of the history of Christian interpretation prevents him from calling the pacifist reading "puzzling." Instead, he acknowledges the many Christian interpreters who cited Matthew 5:38-42 as support for pacifism. These interpreters usually belonged to minori-

ty communities and were more common before the time of Constantine. Finally, Allison's awareness of discussions among pacifists keeps him from equating pacifism with passivity, as Talbert's illustration presupposed.

But Allison is no pacifist, and he does not prefer the pacifists' reading of these passages. He claims that pacifists are literalists in their reading strategies. They take Jesus to be offering a set of principles or laws which are supposed to have direct application in our own communities. But they fail to acknowledge the real difference that exists between their native communities and those of Jesus and Matthew. Consequently, pacifists read without the work of imagination that would bridge the two communities. The result is often unsustainable and sometimes absurd in the real world.

Put differently, pacifists are not realists. They do not recognize that in our present communities we must sometimes choose between two evils. Like Talbert, he wonders, "What do we do when there is a conflict between love of neighbor and love of enemy?" (p. 97). Other times, those of us in the real world are caught between two goods: say, the good of government and the good of being Christian. Those who "have found themselves both Christians and members of governmental organizations...have necessarily found new ways of understanding Matthew 5:38-42" (p. 98).³

These two criticisms, literalism and lack of realism, then, reduce to one: pacifists fail to acknowledge the reality of one's own culture as a necessary and determinative dimension of Christian action. "We do not live within the

first-century world of Jesus or Matthew or share their culture or participate in their forms of government. We live rather in the age of capitalism, democracy, secularization, and technology – modern realities that shape our identity” (pp. 174-175).⁴

An adequate response to Allison’s reading of the Sermon would include an alternative Anabaptist reading. This alternative reading would need to mark out a strong line of continuity with Jewish traditions, give a full account of the Sermon on the Mount in its contexts, and establish itself as thoroughly realistic. It should provide a reading that is neither legalistic nor literalistic. We find such a reading in Glen Stassen’s *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 201 pp., \$21.95).

While Stassen steers clear of legalism and literalism in his reading, these do not constitute his primary concerns. Legalism and literalism do not pose the greatest threats to our understanding of the Sermon, and Jesus has not come to save us from these. The antagonists in Stassen’s reading are, first, Greek idealists. Greek idealism (and not Jewish legalism) is the “human effort to make ourselves perfect and live up to what seem like impossibly high ideals” (p. 15). In contemporary culture this is complemented, second, by the “backwash from the Enlightenment...[that] does not expect God to do new things” (p. 16). Like legalism and literalism, Greek idealism and the Enlightenment are inadequate solutions for our real problems.

Our real problems are sin and death. Anger, lust, greed, lies, egoism, nationalism, and militarism make up our daily lives and threaten our true and lasting joy. These may be given form by capitalism, democracy, secularization, and technology; the resulting institutions may shape our modern identities, but they are not morally or religiously neutral. They demand our assent and our loyalties. They are “necessary.” “The world is thus.”

Dale Allison suggests that we bow to necessity. “Rather than condemning the exegetical changes brought by the Constantinian revolution we should regard them as inevitable and consistent with the fact that the Sermon on the Mount offers examples that call the moral imagination into play” (p. 98). This view of the inevitable betrays a lack of imagination, and Stassen worries about its implications:

I believe that if we do not see how Jesus’ teachings are rooted in the Old Testament, we treat them like flowers that have been pulled out of the soil and displayed in a vase of water. They get thin, or even lose their life. Similarly, when the teachings of Jesus are uprooted and we plant them again in our own soil. They take on the meaning we put into them, rather than retaining their real meaning. We shape his teachings to fit the distortion of our own interest: greed, militarism, nationalism, racism, individualism, and rationalization of what we wanted to hear Jesus say. (p. xv)

Stassen's apparently conservative hermeneutic makes him more politically radical and more theologically potent. He locates Jesus in "the realistic tradition of the Hebrew prophets" (p. 40). They are "realistic" in three senses. First, they harbor no illusions about the anger, lust, greed, and violence behind and in people's actions (p. 62). But they are also realists in that they

Glen Stassen's apparently conservative hermeneutic makes him more politically radical and more theologically potent. He locates Jesus in "the realistic tradition of the Hebrew prophets."

tell us that God will deliver us, and that we can participate even now in God's reign. Finally, "Jesus' teachings are realistically purpose-driven" and will have results in the real world (p. 98). Stassen can support his point not with hypothetical examples but with historical illustrations: debt forgiveness, tax reform, Clarence Jordan, Alabama governor Bob Riley, Bul-

garian Baptist minister Parush Parushev, Martin Luther King, Jr., Quakers, family and friends, and the list goes on. In terms of concreteness, practicality, and contemporary application, Stassen's work far exceeds the others. Those who think that Jesus' Sermon does not make sense in the real world may well be operating out of idealism.

For Stassen, context may be everything, but it is not the only thing. The text has its own meaning, and that meaning can speak powerfully enough to reorder our present context. If Jesus saves, it is because God reigns and Jesus is Lord. Jesus is necessary and inevitable for the Christian imagination in ways that the nation-state, capitalism, technology, and even democracy are not. And that is a different, more original gospel.

NOTES

1 *The Mission*, written by Robert Bolt and directed by Roland Joffe (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1986).

2 Virtues which deserve mention include these: Allison draws distinctions swiftly and with clarity. He draws on the depth of the Christian tradition as well as providing context in Jewish traditions and sometimes in Hellenistic traditions. He is measured in his conclusions, not stating them more strongly than his argument has warranted and explicitly recognizing that reasonable and honest people may disagree. More specifically, I found his discussion of lust quite helpful in the context of modern debates (pp. 71-77).

3 From the perspective of the believers' church, this begs the question: no one just "finds" herself a Christian, for to become Christ's disciple requires her consent and commitment.

4 The source for this critique, Allison acknowledges in his final chapter, is H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951). Allison considers the "Christ against Culture"

model—the view that culture is totally corrupt and must be avoided, which Niebuhr attributes to a range of Christians from Catholic monastics to Anabaptists—as a primary threat to a workable understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. For a critique of Niebuhr’s typology from an Anabaptist perspective, see Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996). Niebuhr’s general framework lives on in current accounts that define fundamentalism as a denial of the modern world, a denial that nonetheless ties it to the modern world. Fundamentalists of all stripes, it is said, want to start with revelation or with God, etc., but their attempts to deny the modern world are unsustainable and absurd because the modern world is the real world.



GREGORY A. CLARK

is Professor of Philosophy at North Park University in Chicago, Illinois.

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

More important than examples of solitary "heroes and saints" would be accounts of COMMUNITIES living out the Beatitudes. The miracle of the Amish in Nickel Mines is that a community still exists where the seemingly unimaginable has become reality.

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

But for all his unsettling insistence that we change, Jim Forest reminds us that the Beatitudes are “blessed” promises—they lead us to rejoicing.

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).



ARTHUR PAUL BOERS

is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology and Director of the Spiritual Formation Program at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

Customizing Your Study of the Sermon

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is a basic text for understanding Christian discipleship. Even though not all of Jesus' moral teachings are collected there and not all of it is ethical instruction, the Sermon holds the key to our grasping what it means to follow Jesus. It is a moment of moral clarity that orders Jesus' teachings and illuminates his deeds as well. "In the history of Christian thought – indeed in the history of those observing Christianity," Luke Timothy Johnson has rightly observed, "the Sermon on the Mount has been considered an epitome of the teaching of Jesus and therefore, for many, the essence of Christianity."[†]

Of course, many parts of the Sermon – like the Beatitudes (5:3-12), the so-called antitheses where Jesus interprets the Law (5:21-48), or the Lord's Model Prayer (6:9-16) – are multifaceted gems that our contributors cannot fully explore in these pages. Fortunately, the Sermon is the scripture passage which is most often cited and carefully examined by others in the twenty-five previous issues of *Christian Reflection*. Therefore, I invite you to draw on those resources to expand or tailor your reflection on the Sermon. They are available for free download in PDF format in the "Ethics Library" on the Web site of Center for Christian Ethics, www.ChristianEthics.ws, or you may contact the Center to order printed copies of back issues of *Christian Reflection* as these are available.

As you plan a small group study of the Sermon, feel free to mix the articles (and associated study guides) in this issue with various ones from previous issues of *Christian Reflection*. Here are my suggestions of past articles that are helpful. To make them convenient to find on the Web site, they are posted as "further reading" with this issue in the Ethics Library.

Repeatedly the Sermon calls us to imitate Jesus' peacemaking ways. George Mason's *Making Peace with Our Enemies* (in the *Peace and War* issue, 64-68) applies the instruction to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48) in very personal situations. He urges us to be "pitiful peacemakers" rather than righteous warriors in dealing with personal enemies. "I mean the word *pitiful* in its noblest sense. To have pity is not to look down on someone, but rather to look up at what that person might be if it weren't for the evil

that has taken hold in the soul," Mason writes. "This is, after all, the kind of pity God has for you and me in Christ Jesus." In *Just Peacemaking in an Age of Terrorism (Peace and War, 36-43)*, Glenn Stassen considers how nations can pursue "just peacemaking practices" that advance democracy and human rights and foster just and sustainable economic development.

For the Sermon on the Mount "to function as part of a normative guide for Christian decision making," Charles Talbert reminds us in this issue, we must interpret passages like these on peacemaking in their scriptural contexts—"in the context of Matthew as a whole, in the context of the New Testament as a whole, in the context of the biblical plot as a whole." In *Matthew's Nonviolent Jesus and Violent Parables (Parables, 27-36)*, Barbara Reid explores the difficulty that in the First Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers. Harry Maier's *The War of the Lamb (Peace and War, 18-26)* tackles a difficulty within the New Testament context—that in the apocalyptic "militaristic visions of divine judgment and violent subjugation of enemies" in the Book of Revelation, Jesus becomes a general! And in *War in the Old Testament (Peace and War, 11-17)*, John Wood discusses a pacifist tradition that survives within Israel's often-violent history. In interesting ways these three writers allow the Sermon to guide their interpretation of the wider scriptural contexts, even as those contexts inform their reading of Jesus' call to peacemaking.

Jesus' warning in the Sermon that we cannot serve two masters, God and mammon (or, material wealth), is another important theme examined in past issues of *Christian Reflection*. Craig Blomberg's *Mastering Mammon (Consumerism, 19-26)* is not only a wonderful overview of Jesus' teachings on money and concern for the poor, but also an inspiring case for Christians to practice a "graduated tithe" of their income. In *Hazmats or Good Gifts? (Parables, 37-43)*, Dorothy Jean Weaver illuminates three striking parables of Jesus concerning money and possessions in the Gospel of Luke: the Rich Fool (12:13-21), the Dishonest Manager (16:1-13), and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). Arthur Simon warns in *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth (Consumerism, 65-70)*, "We affluent Christians accept our comparative luxury and consider so little the suffering of others. Surely the spirit of mammon lives not only within the secular culture, but also within the church and within us." He helpfully contrasts the meekness Jesus commends in the third beatitude—which is our humble obedience to and trusting in the gracious God—to the grasping attitude that characterizes human greed to seize the material wealth of the earth.

NOTE

† Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Sermon on the Mount," *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, edited by Adrian Hastings (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 654.

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY CALL FOR PAPERS

SECOND ANNUAL BAYLOR SYMPOSIUM ON FAITH AND CULTURE

Bottom-up Approaches to Global Poverty: Appropriate Technology, Social Entrepreneurship, and the Church

Thursday, October 23-Saturday, October 25, 2008
Baylor University, Waco, Texas

Featured Speakers

Bernard Amadei
Christopher Barrett
Ken Eldred

J. Andrew Kirk
Perla Manapol
Caesar Molebatsi

Ray Norman
Paul Polak
Glenn White

The church's response to those most in need is a sign of God's presence in the world. Yet the mission of the church does not move in one direction—from West to East, first to third world, or affluence to poverty. Nor is it controlled from a central location or organization. Located in every province of every country, the church is situated to react to the needs of the poor in an especially powerful way—from the bottom up.

Prompted by God's call to meet the needs of the poor, marginalized, and oppressed, Christians can respond sensitively and productively to poverty through faith-inspired practices of appropriate technology and social entrepreneurship. The former draws on a community's existing talents and resources to produce technology that is simple, inexpensive, easily maintained, culturally acceptable, and responsive to genuine human needs. The latter finds alternative approaches to corporate structures to provide opportunities to improve the physical and social conditions of the poor.

Instead of rivals at cross purposes, these three forces—local church, appropriate technology, and social entrepreneurship—hold enormous promise when they converge, for they have the potential to create genuine social change and express Christian faith and witness.

We invite papers, panel discussions, and poster presentations from all disciplines that reflect on the variety of ways that global poverty might be addressed through the nexus of appropriate technology, social entrepreneurship, and Christian mission. Possible session titles include the following, though contributions on other specific topics, questions, or books are welcome and encouraged:

Appropriate Technology for Developing Countries
Church-based Initiatives for the Poor • Micro-enterprises and Micro-financing
Economic Development and Renewable Resources • Holistic Missions
Low-Cost Housing and Infrastructure • Economic Markets in Poor Countries
Business as Mission or the Mission of Business

Abstracts of 500-750 words should be submitted by **April 1, 2008**, and should include name, affiliation, address, and e-mail address (if available). Please submit proposals to the Institute for Faith and Learning, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97270, Waco, TX 76798-7270, or by e-mail to IFL@baylor.edu. See www.baylor.edu/ifl/poverty for further details.

The Center for Christian Ethics
announces the third annual



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Editors



ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

General Editor

Bob Kruschwitz is Director of the Center for Christian Ethics and Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University. He convenes the editorial team to plan the themes for the issues of *Christian Reflection*, then he commissions the lead articles and supervises the formation of each issue. Bob holds the Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin and the B.A. from Georgetown College. You may contact him by phone at 254-710-3774 or by e-mail at Robert_Kruschwitz@baylor.edu.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

Art Editor

Heidi Hornik is Professor of Art History at Baylor University. She selects and writes analysis of the artwork for *Christian Reflection*. With the M.A. and Ph.D. in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University and the B.A. from Cornell University, her special interest is art of the Italian Renaissance. With Mikeal C. Parsons, she coedited *Interpreting Christian Art* and coauthored *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting*. You may contact her by phone at 254-710-4548 or by e-mail at Heidi_Hornik@baylor.edu.



NORMAN WIRZBA

Review Editor

Norman Wirzba is Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Georgetown College, where he teaches courses in the history of philosophy, environmentalism, and Christian Theology. Norman holds the M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy from Loyola University of Chicago, the M.A. in religion from Yale University, and the B.A. from the University of Lethbridge, Alberta. He is the author of *The Paradise of God* and *Living the Sabbath*. You may contact him by phone at 502-863-8204 or by e-mail at Norman_Wirzba@georgetowncollege.edu.



WILLIAM D. SHIELL

Proclamation Editor

William D. Shiell is Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. He has served on leading committees of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. After receiving the B.A. in religion from Samford University, he earned the M.Div. in theology from George W. Truett Theological Seminary and Ph.D. in religion from Baylor University. His weekly sermons are published online in audio format at www.fbcknox.org. You may contact him by phone at 865-546-9661 or by e-mail at shiell@fbcknox.org.

Contributors

ARTHUR PAUL BOERS

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology, and Director of the Spiritual Formation Program, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN

BURT L. BURLESON

University Chaplain, Baylor University

SHANE CLAIBORNE

Founding partner of The Simple Way community, Philadelphia, PA

GREGORY A. CLARK

Professor of Philosophy, North Park University, Chicago, IL

HEIDI J. HORNIK

Professor of Art History, Baylor University

JOY JORDAN-LAKE

Visiting lecturer, Belmont University, and writer, Nashville, TN

ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Director, Center for Christian Ethics, and Professor of Philosophy, Baylor University

CHARLES H. TALBERT

Distinguished Professor of Religion, Baylor University

BONNIE BOWMAN THURSTON

Writer on Christian spirituality, Wheeling, WV

JONATHAN WILSON-HARTGROVE

Cofounder of the Rutba House, Durham, NC

RICHARD WARD

Associate Professor of Preaching and Performance Studies, Iliff School of Theology, Denver, CO

ANN BELL WORLEY

Freelance writer, Chicago, IL