

“God who is merciful and comforting” by Sandra Miller



The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 29, 2023

Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Holy Spirit, I trust that you guided my heart, head and hands as I wrote this offering, and pray you to be my guide as I offer it to my community. May the words I speak be received in love and curiosity by open minds and hearts, all in your name. Amen

Marjory reminded us a few weeks ago that epiphany means a sudden insight or flash of intuitive understanding, I hope we can always be open to such experiences.

Barry Lopez wrote: *"I think when you're young you want to learn the names of everything... But it's the syntax that you really are after. Anybody can develop the vocabulary. It's the relationships that are important."* Lopez's quote feels like an invitation to working with the relationships in the Beatitudes, especially in a time that calls us all to be open to epiphanies that enlarge our vision and our part in God's creation.

A recent Richard Rohr Daily [Meditation](#) contained this observation: "It's the nature of culture to have its agreed-upon lies. Culture holds itself together by projecting its shadow side elsewhere. That's called the 'scapegoat mechanism'." It is the concept that allows a vast majority of people to believe that every incarcerated person deserves to be behind bars, that they are beyond redemption, are probably uneducated, and other negative assumptions. It makes it possible to walk away from the truth and let it fester and rot the heart of society at large, until we stand in the face of such national traumas as mass incarceration, lack of gun control measures, and rampant injustice.

In Matthew 25:34 Jesus reminded the apostles that when he was in prison, they came to visit him, because when they did for the least of these, they did for him. This is my not so subtle invitation to consider becoming a pen pal to someone who is incarcerated, as a means of visiting them. Relationships with people are how our preconceptions and prejudices are changed.

Rev. Canon Nontombi Naomi Tutu preaches that "Our faith has been about the communities faithfully modeling a way of being in the world, of being in relationship with each other and with the prisoner and the hungry. "

Can Jesus' lessons through the Beatitudes offer us a framework

for how we think about those who are incarcerated? Whether for those who have committed heinous crimes, those who should have aged out of being caged, those who should have been offered the ability to be part of a restorative justice process, those who should have gone into a mental health facility for care and the opportunity to heal, those who should have been given probation for a minor crime, those who have qualified for parole and remain behind bars, and those that comprise the hundreds of thousands that are innocent of the crimes for which they have been convicted. Regardless of the reason they have been ostracized by incarceration, I posit that they have a place in the structure of the Beatitudes as windows to what God's work is for us in service to them, and what conversely they offer to us in recognition of that service. That is how the Beatitudes are structured, though the participants change dependent on what structure we use for reflection.

[Nick Cave](#) wrote that "Rather than feel impotent and useless, you must come to terms with the fact that as a human being you are infinitely powerful, and take responsibility for this tremendous power. Even our smallest actions have potential for great change, positively or negatively, and the way in which we all conduct ourselves within the world *means something*. You are anything but impotent, you are, in fact, exquisitely and frighteningly dynamic, as are we all, and with all respect you have an obligation to stand up and take responsibility for that potential. It is your most ordinary and urgent duty." Sounds like Jesus speaking to me.

Two days after Holocaust Remembrance Day it feels appropriate to quote [Elie Wiesel](#): "I believe in dialogue. I believe if people talk, and they talk sincerely, with the same respect that one owes to a close friend or to God, something will come out of that, something good. I would call it presence. I would like my students to be presence whenever people need a human presence... And when you suffer, you need a presence. [...]"

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

God. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Poor in spirit, and mourning can mean or be caused by many situations. In relation to being incarcerated we could define poor in spirit and mourning as meaning contrite in the context of being affected by guilt, or even simply by the circumstance of being separated from society at large. Is anyone happy, or even content, being shunned? Not to mention the physical conditions of jails and prisons, and the violence encouraged by those conditions.

How can an incarcerated person envision themselves as belonging to the kingdom of God, or being comforted in such circumstances? The good news is that God, nor God who walked with us as Jesus, requires us to believe that we deserve either. It is blessedly and simply so because we are all children of God. My belief is we offer that truth to others, without even naming it to them through relationship. Not by proselytizing, merely by our willingness to be in their life as presence. Spoiler alert! Epiphany: our mere presence may open the way for them to see themselves as part of the kingdom of God.

[Reginald Dwayne Betts](#) writes in the acknowledgements in his book [Felon: Poems](#), addressing the men he knew inside: "I could have been a whole lot of things in this world but it was y'all and a rack of other dudes I only remember in dreams or when y'all remind me of them that first believed some of this was possible. All of the living that's happening in these prison cells, all the desperation and the fight, these poems are born out of that. And may we all find us some freedom soon." Because of the merciful presence of Keese, Juvie, Star, Fats, Luke, and Absolut, Betts found his purpose in life to become a lawyer working for justice for the incarcerated, and established a nonprofit called [Freedom Reads](#) that brings small libraries directly into cell blocks. Far from the stereotype our common culture would have us believe, and unfortunately not the norm, it is a confirmation that presence, the smallest

actions have potential to bring about great change.

And that segues to Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the People of God. I don't believe that the Beatitudes are mere assurances. They are a call to recognition and action, a motivation to live into relationship. Bringing that message to this community seems superfluous as it is the foundation upon which we are built, and in light of how much so many of us do in the world, being a penpal is both as an act of mercy and an act of peacemaking may indeed be too much. I would not claim myself to be merciful, nor a peacemaker through intentionality, yet I acknowledge that some of my penpals have offered accolades that brought me mercy and peace. There is a question of how these qualities are held in tandem, who offers them, and who deserves them.

Kurt invited us to consider the quality of enchantment in his sermon a few weeks ago. I share an enchantment from [The Marginalian](#) by Maria Popova: "[There is a phenomenon](#) in forests known as *inosculation* – the fusing together of separate trees into a single organism after their branches or roots have been entwined for a long time. Sometimes, one of the former individuals may be cut or broken at the base, but it remains fully alive through its sinewy fusion with the former other. This is no longer symbiosis between two distinct organisms but a hybrid new organism fully sharing in the resources of life." Popova adds the not so obvious: "Everything alive has the potential for inosculation in one form or another." Epiphany, a sudden insight or flash of intuitive understanding. Through the Holy One in three we literally live in and through one another.

May it be so. Amen

And should you have head and heart room for further thought, this addendum includes some of the merciful people and peacemakers currently at work.

Who are the truth catalysts, the prophets, when it comes to the injustice in the U.S. Criminal Justice System? I name Michelle Alexander, who in 2010 broke open what was hidden about the Prison Industrial Complex with her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. It's George Floyd crying out that he couldn't breathe, and [Darnella Frazier](#) who was brave enough to video the incident and bring it forward. And just recently [Keenan Anderson](#) who called out "They're trying to George Floyd me!" as a Venice, CA police officer put his arm across Anderson's throat, who was also tasered and died of cardiac arrest after being taken to the hospital. It's [Brittany K. Barnette](#), a lawyer working to right wrongs, and [Clementine Jacoby](#) researching and working to rectify how bad data is the cause for hundreds of thousands of unjust incarcerations. [Emily Bazelon](#) whose book *Charged: The New Movement to Transform American Prosecution and End Mass Incarceration* highlights the longtime and deeply entrenched problem of too much power being entrusted to prosecutors. I could cite many others. For me personally, it is my incarcerated pen pals, that do not think themselves prophets, but share the simple truths of their experiences with me, who are prophets. I'm guessing that others in this community who have incarcerated pen pals have built, or are building, the kinds of relationships that elicit that same sentiment.

I also invite you to consider signing up for Bill Mefford's [50 Years of Failure](#) posts about the criminal justice system.