

February, Year One
Reflection Two

Church Calendar – Lent
8th Day Value – Incarnational Community
Life Practices (Spiritual Disciplines) – Prayer

Spiritual Formation and the Beatitudes

The surprising journey of the Christian life is one of wonder and joy, mixed with sorrow and suffering. We choose daily to allow the Lord to begin the transformation of the wounds and brokenness of our lives. This process takes all of us out of our individual isolation, where sin and addictions thrive, and into a community of confession and accountability where healing and restoration exist in abundance. The “soil of our hearts” has been tilled well and deep, and the “seeds” of the Lord’s love have sprouted, begun to grow and are ready to bear plentiful fruit.

Spiritual formation reaches back to the biblical roots of Christianity and early Church traditions. Different than the classic models of discipleship, formation goes beyond the mainly rational and cognitive models of learning, the gathering of information to impart knowledge and techniques and doctrinal nuances. Spiritual formation is concerned with these matters, of course, but treats them as essential as they relate to matters of character development, soul-care, and the shaping of our inner-lives by the Holy Spirit in the biblical stories of redemption, renewal, and transformation. Self-awareness, confession, accountability, prayer, and service are all critical aspects of what it means to be formed in Jesus. As the Lord “forms” us, we learn to be continually available to the Holy Spirit in His direction and guidance, and deeply aware of our growing strengths as well as limitations. We become leaders who model humility, and serve one another out of devotion to Christ.

This transformed life of faith is lived out within community, displaying the love of Christ for one another and for our neighbors. These 8th Day reflections will expand our biblical worldview as we travel from the Parable of the Prodigal Son to the four Gospel stories of Jesus, and from the richness of the Psalms to the Apostle Paul’s pastoral prayers. This is an on-going discipline of trust and prayer in God’s work within us, expanding our listening hearts to hear the very heartbeat of God, building contemplative communities dedicated to prayer and service to one another and the world. The Sermon on the Mount provides a window into the embracing love Jesus has for humankind. Both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke record versions of the Beatitudes – we will focus on Matthew’s version for the most part. Matthew 5:1-12 is our text.

The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-12

“Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach 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 be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because
of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ longest recorded discourse in the New Testament. Much of the sermon is a discussion of Jewish Law (the Torah) and how the “heart” is the seed-bed of choice between love or evil. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is Jesus’ most descriptive story of the in-breaking kingdom of God; this story is our story. In the same way, the Sermon on the Mount is our story, too. The Beatitudes in particular, become a multi-faceted description of who we are and how we respond to Jesus’ invitation of love and salvation. The Beatitudes, the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Parable of the Good Samaritan, together present stories of depth and clarity, as well as vision and purpose for our lives in Christ.

Readings

Gospel Reading – The Gospel of Matthew

- For this second month, read the entire book of Matthew. While reading Matthew, re-read the Sermon on the Mount, in particular the Beatitudes. Remember to read slowly and prayerfully, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal fresh insights that settle in the heart and mind.

Old Testament Readings

- Read Genesis chapters 1-3 – This is the creation account of how humankind was made in the image of God (Imago Dei), how sin and brokenness entered the world, and how God cared for Adam and Eve, amidst their rebellion.
- Read Psalm 8 – This psalm is a song of praise for the Lord’s good creation and for the wonder of what it means to be made in God’s image.

New Testament Readings

- Read Matthew 18:1-5 – This passage describes Jesus’ command to welcome even the little children and to be like them in innocence and humility.
- Read I John 4:7-21 – This passage is the Apostle John’s encouragement to love and to allow yourself to be loved by God.

Questions and Reflections

- As you study and mediate on the Beatitudes, what does it mean to you to be blessed of God?
- We continue last month’s emphasis on the 8th Day Community’s first value: ***Incarnational Community***. Concerned and active in the causes of justice, we “flesh-out” Jesus’ love for humankind’s brokenness by caring for and living with the marginalized and oppressed. Describe how you have been led by the Spirit to bless other people and share Jesus’ love.
- ***Celtic Christianity Embraced Vulnerability, Integrity, and Holiness***. What do these three aspects of Celtic Christianity mean to you?
- ***This winter season of “Nurturing” focuses on Lent***, the forty days of preparation before Easter. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is a time of giving up something or fasting. How do the Beatitudes relate to the season of Lent, the Cross and Resurrection?
- ***Life Practices #1 (spiritual disciplines) (first year) – Prayer***. This season we practice and emphasize *Prayer*. Praying is dialogue with God, sitting in silence to listen, talking with God in our favorite places of worship and beautiful places of meaning to us. We may pray as a group, corporate gatherings or during special calls to prayer and intercession. We may pray the *Daily Office* and/or *Complines* in the evening and center that time in the Church lectionary with the help of a prayer guide such as the *Book of Common Prayer*, *Celtic Daily Prayer* or other helpful guides. Prayer is praise to God, an intimate meeting of love and of wonder, bathed in mystery. It is important to keep in mind that daily prayer – prayer at all times and in all places – can help us see Jesus in the most ordinary of circumstances. Prayer is a creative gift to be used and grown within community. We also commit to a daily rhythm of prayer as we confront the evils of our times and the opportunities provided to us for witness (Matthew 6:9-14).
- ***Quotes to Ponder:***
“Fear is not a bad place to start a spiritual journey. If you know what makes you afraid, you can see more clearly that the way out is through the fear.”

Kathleen Norris, in *Dakota, a Spiritual Geography*

Personal Reflections

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