

Jeremiah 17:5–8 * Psalm Ps 1:1–4, 6 * 1 Co 15:12, 16–20 * Lk 6:17, 20–26

In Luke chapter 5, Jesus completes the calling of his twelve disciples, and now in chapter 6, Jesus begins their “basic training” with his Sermon on the Plain. Luke’s Sermon on the Plain and Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount closely correspond. There are differences between the versions of Matthew and Luke, but this one thing is clear—they are a series of bombshells. Each one of the beatitudes is a challenge. Each one takes everything that we know about the world and turns it upside down.

So, who should we look to as an example of someone who lived the beatitudes? Saint Francis of Assisi and many other saints immediately come to mind, but who in this modern age should we look to? Perhaps to one who was not even a baptized Christian, Mahatma Gandhi, who led India to independence from Britain through non-violent civil disobedience. Or perhaps we should look to the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. who applied Gandhi’s principles, understood through the lens of the beatitudes, to inspire the civil rights movement beginning in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955.

Dr. King’s book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, chronicles the events of that time. In chapter five Dr. King said, “It was the Sermon on the Mount rather than a doctrine of passive resistance that initially inspired the people of Montgomery to dignified social action; in other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method”. The truth is that there are as many ways to God as there are people on the earth. But they all begin with giving up our pride and our vanity, taking on the attitude of Jesus given to us in the teaching of the beatitudes. Today I would like to consider one of these ways.

About five years ago I was summoned to Mary Greeley hospital by a friend of mine who was preparing for the final days in the life of his son. Joey was just 23, but he had already outlived the expectation of his doctors. Joey was nonverbal, and he suffered from seizures all his life. He also had a smile that could light up a room. The doctors said there was nothing more they could do for Joey, so the family decided to take him home to live out his last days.

About a week later, I got a call from my friend asking me to be the homilist at Joey’s funeral. The family was not Catholic, so they wanted an ecumenical service for Joey on the shores of a pristine little lake just West of Ledges State Park. It was one of Joey’s favorite places to visit, and that made it holy ground. The reading that I chose to proclaim was the “beatitudes” from the Gospel of Matthew. The homily was inspired by the question asked of me as I gave the news of Joey and his passing-- “What was wrong with Joey?” Following is the homily that I shared that day.

People often look at others like Joey and question what is wrong with them. They see their lives as unproductive, or even worse, as a waste of limited resources. They don’t understand what those who loved Joey know. That Joey’s life was not an accident. Joey and others like him have a special mission here on earth. They are put here to remind us of what is important. You might even say that like Jesus, they are sent by the Father to save us. They may not be able to care for themselves, but they have been given one great gift beyond all measure, the ability to love unconditionally. If the world could only see what is right with them.

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

As it was with Joey, many times there are underlying health concerns. Those who choose to love them with all their heart, have to be willing to give them back to God when their time comes. Parents, caregivers, teachers, friends, neighbors, all of you here today have to be prepared at all times to give a piece of your heart away for one so dear. To love someone unconditionally you must also become vulnerable, and we dare not hold anything back. Remember the words of Matthew, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:25) To know Joey is to love him. To give him back to God hurts, but the comfort that God gives us in return will far exceed our sorrow. Joey is home now, and we know in our heart that it is good.

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

Someone like Joey needs people who are willing to become their advocate. Without advocates, there would be no Social Security benefits to keep them alive and healthy. There would be no integration into the public school system that allows them to live in the mainstream of life. There would be no vocational rehabilitation programs to teach them how to live in community.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

Joey is like Jesus in that he is not capable of sin. To sin one has to understand the consequences of one's actions, and to choose to sin anyway. Joey was not capable of making that kind of decision. He only knew how to love. We do not know how Joey knew God while he was here on earth, but we can be quite sure that he did. And we can be sure that he is seeing God face to face right now.

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.

To live with Joey is to live in the moment. It doesn't matter what your plans are for the day. If Joey needs to see the doctor, your plans are suddenly not important. If Joey isn't ready to wake up, you wait. Life with people like Joey is life in the school of love. You learn quickly that life is not all about you, and all of a sudden, you are living outside of yourself. You are ready to become more patient with others and you speak with more understanding.

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

With the advances in neonatal care, it is now possible to diagnose a fetus with a range of so called "birth defects". Often the wisdom of the medical authorities would be to recommend an abortion to the parents, sparing them the heartbreak of having a child with special needs. But, what of the wisdom of God? Does God make mistakes? Was Joey a mistake?

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

What was wrong with Joey? Absolutely nothing! He is the person God loved into existence. His life was spent loving anyone who would accept his love. His life was in complete harmony with the will of God. Happy are those who knew Joey and loved him.

Rejoice and be glad, for Joey's reward will be great in heaven.

I walked over to Joey's dad after the service. He was just standing there on the shore of the lake, hands on hips, looking intently at the sky. In the mist above the lake was a circular rainbow, the likes of which I have never seen, shining down from the heavens! One could even imagine it an angelic halo. There are surely scientific explanations, but Joey's dad just looked to me and said, "Joey is with us", and I said, Yes, I believe he is!

God called the twelve, taught them his way of life and sent them out to change our hearts so that we change the hearts of the people that God puts into our life. We don't all have to be a Mahatma Gandhi, or a Martin Luther King, but we are all called to reflect the love of Jesus in the way we live our life. In the teaching of the beatitudes, Jesus didn't take the teachings of the Old Testament and raise the bar, he removed the bar all together allowing our spirit to soar all the way to God the Father. Every once in a while, God sends a person like Joey into our life to remind us of all that is important.

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February 16-17 2019