

# A Theology of Joy and Healing

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Joy is an intricate part of healing to which little attention is given. Jesus promised us joy before he died. Yet, we experience too little joy in our Christian journey. In this article, the foundation of Christian joy and its relationship to the call to discipleship and to wholeness is explored.

JOY is the mostly unacknowledged "divine potential" in each of us. Jung might call it the "golden shadow," that potential to fulfill the dream we have for ourselves and for our various communities. For what is it that brings joy, if not the fulfillment of our dream. In Jesus' early ministry in Nazareth, he expressed his dream in the words of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor [the ultimate Jubilee year]" (Lk 4: 18-19). What an exultant proclamation! And yet in the very next paragraph, when he speaks of bringing the good news to foreigners like the Sidonian widow and Naaman the leper, they haul him out to throw him over the cliff. It seems we are even more resistant to joy, which breaks us out of our narrow tribal boundaries, than we are to seeing our shadow. And so let us permit this word to touch a deep chord in us - to reveal hidden potential, but also our clamorous resistance to it.

We all experience moments of joy: A new love. The birth of a child. The satisfaction of creating something (a book completed, a project successfully completed), a dream that motivates one's work. The success of a loved one, or the healing of a client. Or it may be simply the joy of being understood, like the Samaritan woman who went back into her city filled with "joy" because, as she said, "I've found someone who has told me everything I ever did." I recall the relief and joy I had when I heard in my growth group: "in Nazareth there is no judgment." It was like a huge burden was taken off me. I no longer had to "measure up," "to fit an impossible ideal." I could simply be myself. I remember the joy of recognizing the gift of loving someone who had a similar freeing love for me. That joy was a release of what lay hidden in me, a kind of "coming

home," finding a hidden potential and being able to express it. Isn't that what counseling is all about - to help people find what truly brings them joy.

And yet, how difficult it is for us to sustain that vision of joy. In the parable of the sower, Jesus said that "some seed fell on rocky ground where it sprouted quickly but then withered. These were those who when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, but they have no root in themselves and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away (or stumble)" (Mk 4:16-17). True joy is expansive, vulnerable, scary, and when it arouses opposition (the devil's and others' envy) it demands commitment. I can remember when people would praise me for a fine paper or indicate I really had leadership potential, I would want to hide, or make some self-disparaging remark. The opposition to joy was coming not just from outside but from within myself. I must have felt exposed or required to meet expectations, and my inner defense system kicked in. It takes the humility of Mary to "believe" in a special call. Joy is a great risk. It requires us to let go of complaining, putting ourselves down, blaming others or circumstances, criticizing things because they are not perfect, demanding that we solve every problem, etc. It is impossible to do any of these things if we are joyful. In fact, the inaugural message of Jesus in his ministry was "Repent." And what was the content of repentance "Believe the Good News." We are commanded to be joyful, because the "Good news" has arrived! We wouldn't have to be told that unless there were a strong tendency to do the opposite.

This is a message that seems especially suitable for our age, so invaded by crises as well as potential. We are bombarded with every sort of device and product to increase our happiness - from the latest computer or car to health products and workshops on healing or New Age celebration. If other ages focused on suffering, ours seems to be focusing on celebration and joy. And this is, perhaps, as it should be. Our whole being is meant for joy, it would seem, since we "operate" better when we are joyful. Our bodies function better, our immune system works better, we have more energy and creativity. It is clearly what we are made for. As the fairy tales put it: "They lived happily ever after" or the theologians more technically: "We are made for eternal beatitude."

### **The Need to Discern True Joy**

Yet it is not just any happiness that is the "Joy of the Lord," the joy that is said to be one of the fruits of the Spirit, a sign that the Spirit is at work in us. I can remember writing about Jung in my dissertation and trying to pick out a way to compare his attitude with what I had come to know about Christianity. Jung himself seemed to be filled with abundant energy, yet somehow in his writing

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there was not the burst of joy that I had come to link with the Charismatic renewal. Jung stressed "knowing" and this led to enlightenment, but not to the fullness of joy. Even self-fulfillment did not have that spark of "joy" that accompanied the special touches of God. St. Ignatius loved reading the romantic novels of his day (as did Teresa of Avila), but the pleasure wore off afterwards, whereas he found reading the lives of St. Francis and Dominic left a lasting joy, even though their lives were filled with difficulties and sacrifice. Human joy wears out, the "joy of the Lord" lasts forever. It is this divine joy that will truly be our strength. How can we understand better what it is and how to live it personally and as community?

Joy is the indication that what we are made for is being fulfilled. Yet paradoxically, it cannot be intended directly. As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: the primary end of human existence is the glory of God. The secondary end is human happiness. Or as St. Irenaeus put it a bit differently: "The glory of God is humans fully alive" (that is the saying so much in vogue today when we speak of self-fulfillment as giving God glory), but Irenaeus goes on to say: "the life of humans is the contemplation of God." What we are made for is to reveal God's glory, and the result of that is joy or "beatitude."

The temptation of our age, it would seem, is to reverse this order. We seek to gain ecstatic experiences - the experience of love, a numinous experience of spiritual potentials or of entering the spiritual world, an "out of the body" experience, or even the experience of bringing healing to another or experiencing healing oneself - and call this God. We seek the experience of "self-fulfillment." Yet such experiences wear thin. Today's consolation is tomorrow's desolation. If we seek experiences, we have to keep renewing them, and even increasing them in order to maintain a continual "high." Of such are addictions created. It is important to see that joy cannot be directly intended, but results from being in tune with God's being.

The being in tune with God which brings joy has to do with love. One could say God's being is revealed when we love. If you look into the principles behind all healing methods, you find "love," God's love; the love of the universe.<sup>1</sup> Love is the power that heals. That is why joy comes to us when we are touched by love, or when we experience the creativity of love (in a child or some creative work of ours), or when we experience the love of God in nature - a beautiful sky,

the power of a storm or of a heaving sea, children playing. Joy is effortless and freeing. Our very cells relax, our immune system works better, we get healed faster, our whole body works better. "Follow your bliss," Joseph Campbell said. Let it be the guide that leads to life. I have since found out that joy or beatitude has been central to Christian moral teaching from the New Testament till the time of Thomas Aquinas. We long for joy, and the key to it is union with God. That is why St. Thomas treats beatitude first in his moral teaching and then the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) are what unite us with God. All else is ordered to that end.<sup>2</sup>

Yet true love, God's love, and the joy that results is not just an experience, it is a commitment: "Through good times and bad, through sickness and health, till death do us part (or better till death unites us permanently)." Love is indeed a gift, and joy reveals the path to it, but more basically, it is a choice and a being chosen. It is a choice to hold on to the gift despite the inevitable suffering that will attack it. True joy is worth doing battle for, as we see in Jesus: "Having the joy set before him, he underwent the cross, heedless of its shame" (Heb 12:2). That joy of Jesus was to be reunited with God in the fullness of his humanity, to become like God and so to reveal God's "glory." Paradoxically, as we see in John's Gospel, Jesus was most like God on the cross; this is the truth that gives rest to our hearts. We somehow "know" in the depths of our being, that God's love breaking through all our resistances sets us "free." This truth has become permanently established in our world of hardship and trials through the resurrection Spirit. This is the truth that gives all the other insights into love and its healing power substance and ultimate permanence. Love is what heals, but it heals permanently only when it is grounded in God's total, self-giving love. Let us look first at God's Glory which is the ground of joy, and then at how it looks in our lives. We will conclude by reflecting on God's dream and ours for ourselves.

### **The Joy of the Lord**

If the Joy of the Lord is our strength, what is God's Joy? What does this say about God? and our God image? A major change in our thinking, at least mine, is to experience God as joyful. I had been brought up to attend to God as very serious, as judge, or as one who loves by bearing suffering for us, and thus requiring suffering love in return. Adam and Eve were tempted to see God as "jealous" of their "being like God," as stingy and protective of personal privileges. Others see God as "taking away" what would make them most happy, as a sort of "Grand Depriver," so they have to limit their desires so as not to be disappointed. But to see God as joyful and playful - that may well be a stretch. Yet it is precisely this "conversion" that we are told to make: "Repent and

. . . the inaugural message of Jesus in his ministry was "Repent." And what was the content of repentance "Believe the Good News." We are commanded to be joyful, because the "Good news" has arrived! We wouldn't have to be told that unless there were a strong tendency to do the opposite.

Believe the Good News," Jesus says. As one brother said to me when I was focusing so much on the cross, "It is not all suffering, there is also the resurrection." If God is joyful, then to be joyful in the true sense is to become like God, to reveal God. God is not just one, true and good - God is filled with joy. That is why we become joyful when we are touched by God.

What makes God joyful? What are some of the qualities of God's joy, God's love? Richard of St. Victor, in the 12th century, developed an understanding of God from the nature of love. For love to be complete it needs to be fully received and fully deserved. Otherwise it would be unreasonable. We don't choose just anyone to be our life partner, but one who deeply reflects us back to ourselves. Richard called this person in God the "Co-Worthy," the Second Person of the Trinity. But more is needed. Perfect love is not exclusive but wants to share itself - like parents wanting children to share their love - and this recipient must also be equal to God to fully receive what God can give. Richard called this person the "Co-Loved," the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, then, is like the shared joy of Father and Son, the gift that released creation to receive God's love and so to experience God's abiding joy. When Jesus revealed faith in God's self-giving love on the cross, and gave himself in return, their joint self-gift was the "sending forth" of the Holy Spirit: "He handed over his Spirit" (Jn 19:30). Thus, self-giving love is central to God's joy. More specifically, Jesus calls our attention to several qualities of God's love.

Firstly, Jesus reveals that God is Abba, Daddy. We are used to hearing that from our point of view, but are we used to seeing what it means about God? God as Abba, provides for our needs, numbers the very hairs of each of us, sees us as precious. Not only that, but we actually share God's own being, as mother and child. This is expressed in the Eucharist. God feeds us with God's self. God "rejoices" in us. Just as a mother naturally delights in her child, bone of her bone, so God delights in us. God rejoices in being "father/mother" to us.

Secondly, God's love, far from being stingy, is infinitely generous. It

would seem that God loves to give. Jesus said as much about himself: "All power in heaven and earth has been *given* to me by my father." As Ignatius said: "God is never outdone in generosity." We experience this also when we give freely. We experience something of the joy of God who loves to give. "If your eye be sound,' Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, "your whole being will be filled with light,' and the word for "sound" in Greek means also "generous." God's eye is generous, so God's whole being is "filled with light."

Thirdly, for God to give fully, one must be gifted to fully receive. As we saw, God is triune, a community of giving and receiving love. No finite being could possibly receive all that God wants to give. They would be shattered! So God's joy would never be complete. But the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the perfect image of the Father, equal to God in all things, who delights in receiving all things from the Father. We have heard it said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive," but there is a sense that it is part of God's joy to gratefully receive. And the gift of the Holy Spirit in us enables us to "receive" with an open heart what God wants to give~ but also opens God to "receive" what we in the Holy Spirit give. Just as it is "love" and the creativity of love that makes us joyful, so God is love, not just the altruistic love of helping others~ but the intimate, covenant love that receives freely as well as gives freely. God delights to "receive" love from us.

Fourthly, God's love is totally committed, so committed, in fact, that the oneness of God is infinite, committed community. Love is not just something that "happens" for God~ a kind of "falling in love" such as we experience. God's love is a free choice, a choice that involves God's whole being and gives rise to a perfect image of God in the Second Person of the Trinity, and a perfect expression of their joint, celebrative love in the Holy Spirit. Each is committed perfectly and totally to each other and to their community as a whole. It is precisely this totally assured, free commitment that releases God's joy to radiate out. When we speak of "free love," meaning we are not bound and are free to enter into any relationship with whomever we please, we deceive ourselves. If we cannot be assured of permanent commitment, we will always be calculating how not to lose our love, or how not to give too much and be disappointed. True freedom and joy requires commitment. The assurance of commitment frees us to celebrate and play.<sup>3</sup>

Fifthly, God's love is a passionate, suffering love. We are led to this conclusion by looking at God through the image of Jesus. Joy itself is a passion. It "happens" to us, and lifts us out of self-centeredness. But it presupposes we can also "suffer" with another, and be "pained" by their illness or lack of love. This might seem obvious today, but it was not always so. Aquinas, as Aristotle, would say

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that because God is all perfect God cannot suffer, since suffering implies imperfection in that one does not then have all that is needed for perfect happiness. Jesus Christ can suffer, because he is human in solidarity with a sinful human race, but God must be beyond that - perfect being. On the other hand, such an image of God's perfection seems to leave God beyond our human suffering, foreign to our struggle to stay committed to love, to fight for justice. If to see Jesus is to see the Father, as John 14 says, and Jesus' dying on the Cross *is* his glorification (that is, his fullest manifestation of God's Glory), then God's Glory must be a suffering love. God's heart must be infinitely tender, touched by our need, passionate (that is filled with passion and suffering) and compassionate (that is, infinitely open to suffering with us). And paradoxically, to give credit to Aquinas, this ability of infinite Love to be affected and suffer, must be a "perfection" in God, and part of God's "joy." Isn't a mother "happy" to care tenderly for a suffering baby, or to give her life out of love? It is "joy" for Jesus to give his life totally in response to God's love, because he has a passionate desire to reveal God's love of the most outcast and sinful creatures. "That the world might know that I love the Father and do whatever he tells me, arise let us go." (In 14:31). God's love, as it were, tears God out from inner joy to identify with us and all creation in our abandonment and need.

And, finally, this passionate love of God is infinitely creative and community building. True love is not complete, Richard of St. Victor wrote, until it is shared. God's love is first of all "shared" with the Holy Spirit. In fact, we can understand the Holy Spirit as the shared love of Father and Son, a sort of divine *We* that radiates out to create a community of creative sharing among believers. The early Christian community was noted for its sharing, and that sharing, as the writer of I John affirms, makes his joy complete (I Jn 1 :3-4: "what we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.") In our fruitfulness and sharing, our joy is completed.

But further, this divine *We* is shared in all creation, which shows the signs of the joy of God's infinite creativity. St. Francis rejoiced in creation, brother Sun and sister Moon, the rivers and streams, birds and animals—all

**The Beatitudes: Mt 5-7**  
*Discerning God's Joy*

*Title: No jot of law lost till all fulfilled (5: 17-20)*

*Poor in Spirit have Kingdom*

"ask,  
seek,  
knock" (7:7-11)

*Peacemakers: God's Children*

go not to court  
reconcile  
no anger (5:21-26)

*Mourners are consoled*

give not holy to dogs  
see not splinter & miss plank no  
judging or be judged (7:1-6)

*Pure of heart see God*

no oaths  
no unlawful divorce  
no lust of heart (5:27-37)

*Meek have land*

no anxiety, took at lilies  
"good" (generous) eye  
treasure in heaven (6:19-34)

*Merciful attain Mercy don't*

parade "mercy" love  
your enemy  
go extra mile (5:38-6:4)

*Hunger and Thirst for God's Righteousness (Center)*

fast in secret Our Father pray in secret (6:5-18)

*Those Persecuted for Righteousness (Challenge)*

light of world salt of earth reward in heaven  
(5:11-16)

*Conclusion: (Must choose)*

enter narrow gate  
beware false prophets, see their fruit  
build on rock ■ act on God's words (7:13-27)

Figure 1: Chart of the first seven Beatitudes forming an inclusion with the Our Father in the center -- the focal point of the whole.



our brothers and sisters. The very trees of the fields "clap their hands" (Is. 55:12) in celebrating God's creative love. God joyfully expresses divine love in the whole cosmos, as St. Thomas says, which in its multiplicity and infinity reveals something of the infinite divine beauty and joy. This creativity is what we share in handing on our gifts to others, and in rejoicing in our own creativity. Our inner self is not individual, as Fritz Kunkel pointed out, but is a sharing in the divine *We*, the joy of our communing with all creation and with God.

This is some indication of the "joy of the Lord," - infinite love that is fatherly/motherly, infinitely generous, receptive as well as giving, freely committed, passionately suffering and infinitely creative and community building. It is this joy of God that has entered into our world with Jesus' death/resurrection and sending of the Spirit. This is the joy that empowered the disciples, in spite of their failures and sin, to go out and announce the "Good News." The joy of eternal renewal in God's love, a joy and victory *now* present, now active. The more we enter into it individually and as a community, the more strengthened we will become. How are we to do this?

### **Experiencing this Joy in our Lives - The Beatitudes**

The first step, as Jesus proclaimed it, is "Repent, and. believe the Good News." Paradoxically, as we saw, joy cannot be directly sought or intended, we cannot directly intend happiness or beatitude - our heavenly joy. What we can intend is right thinking and action, and happiness or joy will result. As Jesus says: "Blessed" (Happy) are those who hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. It is in touching God and letting that touch transform our lives that true joy results. What will this "repentance" look like? How can we tell if we are "tuned in" to God's joy, God's Spirit? In general, it would look like what we've seen God's love is like: delighting in being father/mother and in giving parental love, generous, freely committed, passionately engaged, creative and community forming. This is what Jesus' life looked like, it is what he called us to become. But he also gave us a more detailed roadmap in the Beatitudes - the attitudes that make us divinely happy. It will repay us to look at them more carefully in light of joy.

Matthew's account in chapters 5 to 7 is said by one exegete to be his "Pentecostal Meditation."<sup>4</sup> Pentecost, the Spring harvest feast, became a feast celebrating the Sinai covenant. As the end of the Passover, it had no octave, but the day itself was divided into eight prayer periods in each of which was read three stanzas of Psalm 119 - that unending psalm which in every stanza repeats synonyms for the covenant law: law, commands, words, precepts, ways, testimonies, ordinances, statutes, etc. Goulder argues that Matthew wrote chapters 5 to 7 as Christian readings for each prayer period, much like our present

day liturgies which give an OT and a NT reading for the day. Thus he presents 8 beatitudes, and explains each with 3 points beginning from the last and moving to the first in typical rabbinic fashion. At the same time, the first seven Beatitudes form an inclusion with the Our Father in the center - the focal point of the whole.<sup>5</sup> The first then complements the seventh, the second the sixth, the third the fifth, with the fourth as central. The Beatitudes are thus Matthew's key to discerning God's covenant Spirit - a Spirit that makes us divinely happy. They can be charted (see figure 1).

*"Happy are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."* This is explained by the three points toward the end of the sermon: "Ask and you will receive, Seek and you will find, Knock and it will be opened." This first clue to happiness can be seen as the foundation to all the rest. It is not our riches that is the key to divine joy, but our poverty. We have no claim, so grace and God's love is free. We are powerless, the first of the twelve steps says, so our "higher power" can free us. "Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul writes. "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Wasn't it Babsie Bleasdel who gave the prophecy for the Association of Christian Therapists (ACT) some years ago: "If you lack anything, Ask and I will pour out my Spirit on you." Poor people don't make stipulations. They are grateful for whatever God gives. They "give God permission to act," and don't try to control their own destiny. I remember my Novitiate days. We had so little, that the least celebration made us happy. If we have this trusting poverty, Paul continues, "The peace of God" will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Corresponding to this is the 7th Beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers," for ultimately it is accepting our poverty with childlike trust in God that brings our hearts to peace and so we can become peacemakers.

Secondly, we hear: *"Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."* God's joy certainly is paradoxical! The explanatory passages here would be "Judge not and you will not be judged" "Don't look at the speck in your brother's eye and miss the beam in your own" and "Don't throw your pearls before swine." The mourning, then, is mourning for one's own sins, but I think also "be aware of your limitations and negative emotions." It is in acknowledging our sins and hurts that we experience God's forgiveness and compassion, and a deep release of joy. The Samaritan woman asked Jesus for "living water," and he said "call your husband!" She could not get living water until she opened her life to the truth - that the husband she now had was not her husband. She had to get her life straightened out and into the light first. But far from discouraging her, that admission before the affirming love of Jesus made her rejoice and go with

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joy back to the city. If we admit our faults to those who don't appreciate us (the "swine"), they will use them against us and trample on us. If we admit them in a loving community, they are the pearl of great price that opens to us the Kingdom. In my growth group, we express our anger and shame, our guilt and sadness, and as we do we experience ever more deeply the love and compassion of the community. A deep joy and freedom is released, like the joy in heaven over "one sinner who repents." This Beatitude is paired with the 6th: "Blessed are the pure of heart ..., for it is suffering and sin acknowledged that purifies us and helps us "see God."

We then hear: *"Happy are the meek, for they shall possess the land."* The Promised Land was where Israel would find home, would plant and harvest their own crops, would be free from slavery and oppression, free to worship their God. They will possess the land, not by their power but by "meekness," which from Psalm 37 means, submission to God. Meekness, then, does not mean "retiring" or "weak" but rather "openness to God and God's ways." "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord" (Rom 12:19). Thus the explanatory passages have to do with not laying up treasures on earth, with having a "generous" not "greedy" eye, and with not worrying like the lilies of the field, but rather seeking God's Kingdom and trusting "all will be given." It is precisely this "meekness" that Israel seems to have lost from Adam on, and especially whenever it got into the Promised Land. It began to use the land for its own purposes, and to anxiously try to preserve its own life. But what they tried to avoid, they actually caused. In trying to avoid the destruction of the Temple, by *their* righteousness, they caused it. In trying to avoid Exile, by resisting the Babylonians against Jeremiah's word, they brought it about. The way to "possess the land" is continual submission to God and God's Glory, for the land is God's and it will be given as a free gift to the meek. It is God's possession, and God will give it to the meek. If we have a "generous eye," looking for how we can serve rather than how to preserve ourselves, our joy will increase. As Isaiah 58:6ff says: "This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, setting free the oppressed ... then your light shall break forth like the dawn .., then you shall call, and the Lord will answer ... then the Lord will guide you always ... and renew your strength." The paired 5th Beatitude is "Blessed are the merciful " It is the meek who experience God's compassionate care who show mercy to others.

And fourthly we hear: *Happy are those who hunger and thirst for what is God's righteousness, for they shall have their fill."* This is the central Beatitude, whose core is the Our Father, with statements about giving alms and fasting in secret so that God will reward us placed before and after it. Our focus, as Jesus',

must be on God and God's guidance and glory. That is why we contemplate God's joy, that we might model our lives on God. "Be you compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate," Luke 6:36 says, or "Be you perfect [in love] as God is perfect," is how Matthew 5:48 puts it. What brings God's joy is living a life inspired by God. When we pray "May Your Name be made holy" we are centering in God being glorified (as Jesus said was his life: "I have glorified your name on earth," (In 17:4). When we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven" we acknowledge that God has a will for earth (it is not just left to us) and we are committing ourselves to being channels for God's rule to come to earth. Just as Jesus "only did what he saw the Father doing," so our healing ministry is to be a revelation of God's desire to heal, not a using of God's power for our purposes. God "heals" so that we can "believe" in Jesus and be freed to love in a committed way as God loves. That is God's gift to our Christian communities for the world. Having the heart of Jesus is having the heart of God and revealing that to the world. It is a true gift, especially for the poor and sinners, grounded in trust that God will provide for our needs (will "give us our daily bread," both physical and Eucharistic), that God will forgive us our inadequacies and sins as we do that for others, and will stand by us in our trials and will deliver us from the ultimate enemy, the Evil one. If we truly listen and carry out what we hear, we will experience the generous love of God and be grounded in joy. I think of Ken McAll, M.D., who recently visited us in Chicago, how he prays the Our Father with gestures, as he once envisioned Jesus doing, and then talks with Jesus about his day. We will then share Jesus' mission: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor..." (Lk 4). This is the center from which all the Beatitudes flow.

The next three beatitudes then form a kind of inclusion with the first three. They help interpret one another. *"Happy are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy,"* complements "the meek," who are submitted to God. Is it not the sense of being "at home" with God that frees us to be creatively compassionate with others. Such don't retaliate because they look to God, not to those who hurt them to make things right. They do good for their enemies, because they realize God lets the sun shine on the good and bad alike. Like Joseph in the OT, they can forgive because they do not look at the harm the brothers intended, but at the good God intended. Mercy is a mark of the joy of God's heart, and of Jesus' heart, and it is the mark of those who are truly mature in heart. The meek receive the whole earth and the merciful give all they have away. It is in giving that we receive, it is in giving and receiving that we enter God's joy.

The sixth beatitude, then, corresponds to the second: *"Happy are the pure of heart for they shall see God."* Why? Because they acknowledge their sinfulness

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and suffering and have been comforted by God. It is in accepting our suffering from God's point of view and acknowledging our need for repentance that we become freer from ego-centeredness and see more clearly from God's point of view. Our heart becomes single, focused on God. We are not only made freer from lust, as we are freed from ego-centeredness, but also from control of and from putting our expectations on others. Matthew explains, such are faithful in relationships (the forbidding of divorce is put here), and such say "yes" when they mean "yes" and omit all the oaths and embellishments that lack of confidence in simple truth causes one to make. Thus, what might look like opposites - mourning, simplicity of heart and seeing God - are really mutually related.

The seventh Beatitude complements the first: "*Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.*" The poor in Spirit enter God's Kingdom, and as "children of God" they become peacemakers. Such, Matthew explains, don't kill and even avoid giving room to anger against a brother or sister. They also take steps to be reconciled as soon as possible. True peace, then, is not some human compromise, as important as that might be, but a new creation from God. It took Jesus' self-emptying on the cross to "break down the hostility between Jew and Gentile," (Eph 2: 15-16) between slave and free, woman and man (Gal 3:28). Peace is a restoration of our lives in God's family, and it happens when we become "poor in Spirit," and put on Christ's attitudes.

Finally, the eighth Beatitude tells clearly how committed we need to be and what result we can expect: "*Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*" This concerns the persecution that will come from living this life of God's creative righteousness. Such are truly happy! And Jesus goes on to speak directly to the disciples: "Blessed are *you* when people persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me, *Rejoice and be glad*, for your reward will be great in heaven," and you will mysteriously rejoice on earth too, for you will have what St. Francis called "Perfect Joy!" This is how we become salt for the earth, and light for the world - when our light is so bright it stirs up opposition. A lay missionary from Florida shared an experience that touched me. Her boss, a non-believer, was constantly criticizing her work. One day, after she had worked to organize his materials, he came in and found some fault then took all the materials and threw them on the floor and stamped out. Her first thought was to quit on the spot, but then a divine impulse of peace came over her and she quietly

began to pick up the papers and start over. Later she found out another office worker was standing behind the door, and seeing her response decided to look into Christianity that gave her such peace. The "blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians," is an ancient saying, and it seems also true of our daily martyrdoms suffered in joy. It seems simply that the Spirit of God arouses anger in those not in God. But that very persecution, if one's heart rests in God, only deepens one's union with God. What was already experienced as joy can then become "Perfect Joy." Jesus' death, as terrifying as it certainly was, was a perfecting of Jesus' love of God and a breakthrough into the new creation of God's family. Far from being a failure, it was the ultimate victory that released the joy of God's family in our world.

All in all, we see that God's joy is most challenging. The remaining texts in chapter 7 tell us how to discern and respond to God's Spirit calling us to this new way of living. We can easily be deceived by going the "broad way" that Jesus says most people go (and isn't that a permanent temptation for us, especially for institutions that feel they need broad support). But Jesus says, "Enter the narrow gate." We can get deceived by "false prophets in sheep's clothing," such as many approaches today that pronounce "Joy," but underneath are more interested in getting followers and collecting your money - "ravenous wolves" Jesus calls them. What is the fruit? Is it peace and joy, fruitfulness and freedom? Is it committed, humble love? If so, there must be something true in what they proclaim. We must choose. It doesn't just happen. And the choice will be shown in what we actually do, more than in what we proclaim, for those who hear and don't act are building on sand, Jesus says, whereas those who hear and carry out Jesus' words are building on rock.

### **Trials and Joy:**

#### **Abiding in Faith that God's Dream and Ours May be Fulfilled**

"Count it all joy," James 1 :2-4 says, "when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." And Hebrews 12:2 says: "Having the joy set before him, Christ underwent the cross, heedless of its shame," and Heb 5:8-9 affirms: "Christ was made perfect by what he suffered." Joy is more than an experience; it is a commitment that is actually strengthened by what we go through in bringing it about. I think of mothers who say they are most bonded to the children that caused them the most suffering! What is God's dream and ours? And what has God endured to bring it about, and what are we called to endure?

According to Genesis, Paradise was a kind of "dream state" of God and humans. God walked "familiarily" with humans in the garden. Humans, Adam and Eve, were given to each other as helpers - "face to face." They were told to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, so their fruitfulness was part of God's dream - like parents who wait to see their children and grandchildren. And God gave them the earth and all that was in it as their home and care. This is God's dream, but isn't it also our dream? Don't we also long for that intimacy with God? Don't we have a dream relationship (dream boy or dream girl) to share life with? Don't we long to share what rejoices our hearts with others? And don't we long for a "land," a "home," an environment to care for and that seems to care for us? God has put God's dream in our hearts too!

But sin shattered that dream, and brought a great sadness to God. Before the flood God said he was sorry he ever made humans on the earth and it grieved him to his heart (Gn 6:6). And still in the NT, we are told by Paul not to "grieve" the Holy Spirit by our evil talk (Eph 4:30), so God is still very involved in our response. Sin made us turn away from God in distrust, and we then turned from one another in shame and our offspring, being deprived of unconditional love, turned against each other in envy and the earth became a possession to dominate, not a home to care for and reverence.

But God never let go of the dream. It is grounded in God's very being, and in the heart of each human, and as an invincible seed, it will sprout forth at the proper time. Already in Genesis God took steps to restore the dream. God called Abraham and made him a promise of a great offspring and promised land. Isaac got more land, and Jacob more, and Joseph, through much suffering, managed to reconcile the envious brothers and steward the grudging land. Israel again fell back, and God persisted, taking them from Egypt and teaching them to trust and fight for the Promised Land. Israel again "used" God's gifts for selfish ends, as did David, and started a degeneration that ended with another Exile. This time God promised that "he himself would seek out the lost and shepherd them (Ez 34: II ft), that God would "put his Spirit in their hearts and make them keep the law." But Israel went back to thinking it had to do it! It focused attentiveness on the minutiae of the law.

Finally, we hold in faith, Jesus was sent to fulfill God's dream. He is the "yes" to all God promised (2 Cor 1: 18-20). He is the one whose whole being is an intimate relation to God. It was precisely his faithfulness unto death on the cross, his total emptying of self to open the world to God's joyful Spirit, that fulfilled God's dream. He taught us fidelity and renewed trust between man and woman (as new Adam on the cross with Mary as New Eve - also with Mary Magdalene in the garden). He has released divine fruitfulness through sending

the Spirit. And all creation is again brought under his rule of love. As St. Francis discovered, even the birds responded to his preaching, for Christ has risen into the heart of all creation. God persists, and in Jesus and those who put their trust in him, God's dream is fulfilled, not in a "natural" way, but as a "new creation," a breakthrough of God's own life and Spirit in our world. Sin would kill the "light bearer," legalism would replace the savior with human efforts, the evil one continues to try to make us distrust God, manipulate and control woman and man, make disciples and offspring as disturbed as ourselves and "use" the earth for selfish purposes. The dynamics of sin persists, and is an ongoing threat for any Christian community. Sin would give us a false "light," would gloss over the cost of fulfilling the dream and lure us to trying to fulfill our own dream. *A Course in Miracles*, New Age philosophies, would have us access divine energies and give up thinking about sin and repentance and the need to be redeemed. But the way to "joy" in Christianity is "only" through Jesus, and his cross and resurrection. This is the only joy that remains forever. Through the cross of Jesus, God's dream abides, and if we abide in Christ, we also will experience the working out of that dream in our hearts and in our communities.

In one of his final speeches, Martin Luther King spoke about his dream: "I have a dream," he said at the speech in Washington in 1963, "that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveholders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood " And he went on to elaborate his dream. What is our dream for as healers? What would release our joy? Is it not that we can bring Jesus - the heart of Jesus - into our workplace? That we can touch the suffering and oppressed with the understanding heart of Jesus? Is it not that our hospitals and clinics would radiate with the atmosphere of compassion, that our sick who need a physician or a nurse would experience the care of Jesus? Is it not that more and more of our healing professions would help people find in their illnesses an opening to God's compassion and consolation. God has put this dream in our hearts. God watches over it.

But that dream cannot be fulfilled unless we act on it. We are assured that if we abide in Jesus, and his words or attitudes (the Beatitudes), abide in us, we can ask what we will and it will be given. For "by this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples" (Jn 15:7-8).

## Reference Notes

<sup>1</sup> Louise Hay writes her set of affirmations to bring people to a sense of the trustworthiness of life, of the goodness of their life, of love (See her: *You Can Heal Your Life*). When we rest in God's love and let it penetrate our very cells, healing flows into us. It is a similar insight of Bernie Segal and others. Each is trying to open us to the fact that the cosmos is trustworthy, that we do not have to earn God's love, but that it is given freely in the very act of creation, and trusting that abiding love brings healing.



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<sup>2</sup> See Servais Pinckaers, O. P. *The Sources of Christian Ethics* trans. from 3rd ed by Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1995). Our focus on obligation and what is lawful in moral thinking today resulted from nominalism and attention to individual "moral acts" apart from our overall human orientation. How exciting that the original focus on happiness is being rediscovered.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew Greeley, *Love and Play* (Chicago: Thomas More Pr., 1975), for a development of this point.

<sup>4</sup> See J. N.D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew's Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> See Fritz Kunkel, *Creation Continues* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973).

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