

# ***Turning Our Faces: Except for the Apostles***

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Matthew 5:10–12, Acts 1:4–9, Acts 7:54 8:4

At the top of the Mount of Beatitudes in Galilee, there's a church designed by a famous Italian architect. When you step outside the church, there's a spectacular view of the Sea of Galilee. On a clear day, you can even see, in the distance, the snow-capped Mount Hermon to the north. When we were there in 2005, I pictured Jesus standing on the highest peak, speaking to the crowd below, spread out on the upper hillside.

On the 2007 trip, I had been reading Bargil Pixner, a Benedictine monk who was also an archeologist, and learned about a grotto below the lower part of the Mount of Beatitudes. Around the year 380, a Spanish woman named Egeria traveled to the Holy Land. She made a journal of her pilgrimage, and wrote in the form of a letter to a circle of women back home about the local traditions of the area around the Sea of Galilee. She wrote of stories that had been passed down since the decades after Jesus lived in Capernaum, and carried out his ministry among the villages on the northwest shore.

Based on the writings of Egeria, and his own experience of living at the Benedictine monastery in Tabgha for 20 years, where so many of these Gospel stories take place, Pixner placed the teachings of Jesus and the gatherings of the disciples and the crowds, on the lower part of the Mount of Beatitudes, just above the grotto, which the local, ancient traditions identified as the secret place where Jesus would retreat to pray.

Then in 2009, exactly 10 years ago today, I was about to leave Galilee after one month of living in a Franciscan guesthouse on the northwest shore. After walking back and forth to Capernaum almost every day, exploring the area around the water by more walking than I had ever thought about doing, and countless conversations with locals, including the Benedictine, Franciscan, and Carmelite nuns that I came to know and love, my way of reading and hearing the stories of Jesus was changed forever.

One of my favorite places to hang out was the lower part of the Mount of Beatitudes—just above the grotto that Egeria wrote about 1700 years ago. The view from there is not too shabby, either. Most of the time I was the only one there. All the tourists are taken to the church at the top. One afternoon, I was in my usual spot when a pastor from Connecticut, along with a member of her church, climbed up the hill and joined me. She was wonderful, and before leaving, asked if she and her colleague could pray for me, and bless my sabbatical in Galilee.

She told me that the day before, she had brought a group up to where we were, and had a few of them walk more than a football field away. She then read the beatitudes from Matthew in a conversational tone, and they could hear every word. The acoustics there, and along the water, are amazing, and provided a perfect setting for Jesus to teach and preach to large crowds.

Being there for a month gave me the opportunity to notice so much more than is possible in a brief visit. I had not noticed in 2005 or 2007, some small ruins on the southern slope of the hillside. Sister Catrina, my beloved nun who gave me a key so I

could open a gate to Mensa Christi in the early morning, and have this sacred area by the water all to myself--before the main gate was open to tourists--told me about the ruins of what was once, in the fourth century, a church. We were walking alongside the ruins, and when I asked about them, she said:

*That's the real Church of the Beatitudes.*

In my newsletter column this week, I mentioned that I have not hidden my weirdness from you these 18 years, but neither has it been on full display. So I will tell you now that I passed by these ruins multiple times every day, and each time I would stop and bow in their direction.

Sometimes I could almost see the people inside worshiping, especially when I walked by there in the dark. It felt like I was befriending these souls from so long ago, whose desire it was to worship as close as they could possibly get—perhaps no more than 30 yards—from where Jesus sat with his disciples, and stood to address the multitudes. Those like Sister Catrina in Tabgha, Father Jerome in Capernaum, and Sammy Jabali from Nazareth, consider this little congregation to have been the true Church of the Beatitudes, not the ornate one at the top of the mountain. And I came to believe that, too.

If this fourth century congregation could have been transported back to the time of Jesus, they would have heard his voice from inside their sanctuary.

Yet, as thrilling as that would have been, proximity to the physical presence of Jesus, the experience of hearing his voice and seeing his face, does not in itself guarantee that you are truly hearing Jesus, or understanding his words. No one had a front row seat to Jesus like the disciples, the ones who later were known as the apostles, and the men and women who followed him from village to village.

It must have alarmed them when Jesus said, at the end of the beatitudes:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, 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.*

There are stories about the apostles eventually becoming heroic martyrs, but that was later. They were **so slow** to understand what Jesus was saying, and their lack of comprehension frustrated him.

After all this time of being with Jesus, close to him day and night; after all these times of experiencing him as risen Christ, Luke writes in his account of the Ascension, that as the visible presence of Jesus is about to vanish for the last time, they ask him only seconds before he disappears:

*Is it now, Jesus, that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*

They are still stuck in the mud of tribalism, still thinking that it's all about Israel.

It's very possible that when a persecution broke out in Jerusalem against followers of Jesus, the apostles were left alone because they were not viewed as a threat to the status quo. The ones forced to leave Jerusalem were the ones whose vision surpassed that of the disciples. They were more forward-thinking, more progressive with a larger view of the world, and a more inclusive understanding that Jesus as Christ had broken all barriers, and transcended all categories of nationalities, races, and religions.

Before Luke's account of the stoning of Stephen, he describes how Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, is brought before the council. When asked by the high priest if the charges of blasphemy against him were true, Stephen launches into a long history of Israel, beginning with Abraham and his descendants who, in his words, were:

*resident aliens in a country belonging to others.*

They did not like being reminded of that.

He spoke of Joseph, Moses, and Solomon, and after his long narration of Israel's history, Stephen tells the Sanhedrin Council that they are as stiff-necked as their ancestors.

*You are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, he said, and  
Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?*

They became enraged, Luke writes, and ground their teeth. They dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death. Then Luke writes:

*That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all  
except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and  
Samaria.*

Luke adds the detail that Saul stood by, approving the stoning of Stephen. Later, after his dramatic conversion, he would be known by his Greek name, Paul, and he would insist on being called an apostle, equal to the original disciples of Jesus. His message clashed with Peter and the others, and there was deep resistance among the apostles when Paul preached an unhindered Gospel to the Gentiles.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples in Galilee,

*on the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.*

Perhaps they gathered once again on the Mount of Beatitudes. And Jesus said to them:

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.*

But what they heard was:

*Go and make disciples of **the children of Israel** in all the nations.*

They were so far from catching up with the universal vision of Jesus.

It's important for us, all these centuries later, to surpass the original vision of the original apostles. At the same time, we cannot surpass the vision of Jesus, not only Jesus as cosmic Christ, but Jesus as a son of Galilee. On that same mountain, in the teachings gathered into what is called the Sermon on the Mount, including the beatitudes, Jesus put forth an extraordinary and, for his context **and ours**, a provocative vision of kingdom-of-God living.

He was not talking about the kingdom of Israel. Over and over Jesus said, referring to the Law and the teachings of Israel:

*You have heard it said, but I say unto you.*

*Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you*, he said, perhaps the most original and provocative thing he said. Jesus spoke and embodied a vision of God's love and grace, **a love and grace that excludes nobody!**

The two questions I've been asked most frequently these last few months:

*What are you going to do in retirement?*

and:

*What will you and Jean do about a church?*

When it comes to looking for a church, I'll do what so many others do--begin with google.

I'll just google:

Where are the churches in Frederick County, Maryland, that say they're welcoming and inclusive, and wholeheartedly mean what they say?

List the congregations that with genuine interest and warmth, welcome every person who walks through their doors for the first time?

Tell me about the churches that understand it's not anti-Semitic to oppose the state of Israel's inhumane oppression of Palestinian men, women, and children.

Where are the churches that hold in their sanctuaries weddings for couples who love each other, without telling them who it's okay to love?

Let me know where we can find a congregation of disciples who are at the same time clear about who they are, but also open to a vision of Jesus they have not yet seen and heard, and in the meantime, understand how important it is to love one another.

List the congregations that are passionate about God's work of justice.

There's more, but maybe that's asking too much of google.

Don Moore and I have engaged in many conversations about the state of the world, and one thing we keep coming back to is all the goodness in the world that is ready to be harnessed and channeled to make the world more just, more in line with the will of God, on earth as it is in heaven.

Whether it's Jerusalem in the decade after Jesus, or where we are today, there's a problem when churches or gatherings of disciples lack vision, and are less compassionate and inclusive than a moral, decent, and justice-loving atheist. Too often, churches are anywhere but on the cutting edge of social change that elevates justice, and lets it:

*roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

You cannot go wrong following the Way of Jesus.

I want you to know that I trust your vision, your open hearts and open minds, and your willingness to question what it is in the very soul of Christ that you have not yet seen. I trust your love for one another. I trust your desire to be God's people, to follow the Way of Jesus, and to be open to the surprises of God's Spirit, Who dwells in you and among you.

We have another month, but I want to thank you now for spoiling me by showing what church can be. I want to thank you for loving me, and for receiving my love.

And for our life together, thanks be to God!

Amen.