

Panorama

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

February 2, 2020

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Hyperlinks to Hyatt Moore's website

Image 1: <http://www.hyattmoore.com/egallery/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Garage.jpg>

I want to introduce you to an artist whose work is marvelous. Hyatt Moore based in California and paints many subjects, but it's his series of paintings based on the Beatitudes (the "blessed are" statements of Jesus) in today's Gospel, that caught my attention.

The Beatitudes are a collective vision of Jesus to be seen as all part of one larger vision, and so Hyatt Moore created his Beatitude pieces to be seen as part of a larger vision. Look at pieces together (see image of artist with his pieces of art standing together) I imagine it as a panorama; God's bigger vision of wholeness that we are invited to see too.

With the beatitudes, Jesus is painting a picture of people who, many listed there, might carry great burdens. An obvious question we might ask: How blessed would people Jesus mentions feel?

Jesus says:

- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness' sake.
- Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Liberation Theologians of Latin America say that God has a special concern for the most oppressed, and that kin-dom vision will turn our world's pecking orders upside down – Remember Jesus saying that "...the last shall be first, and first last" in the kin-dom?

The suffering and injustice in South and Central America is the context of such a radical interpretation of Jesus' teachings. But with a deterioration in our social safety nets in North America this understanding that God has a special care for the vulnerable; that radical interpretation can resonate with many in downtown Sudbury.

Could there be a political undertone to this sermon of Jesus?

Let's allow Hyatt Moore's artwork be a lens through which we might see God's vision of wholeness as we look at three of the Beatitudes.

Image 2: <http://www.hyattmoore.com/egallery/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Bless-Poor-in-Spirit-1.jpg>

"Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven"

Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus says, "for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven." Who among us cannot imagine our face looking like this after a long day, or week or maybe year?

I'm guessing that this woman does not at all feel "blessed." The *Message* translation has Jesus saying, "Happy are you..." rather than "Blessed are you..."; to be honest, I think that "happy" is an overused word in the media today. I'm not a fan of the Gospel

according to Hallmark. *Happy* somehow conjures in my mind the formulaic “happy” endings of every Hallmark movie.

Blessed are the poor in spirit

Notice that Jesus here doesn't say “poor” as in economics. Poor in spirit; I imagine a single parent whose day never ends, and who has to choose between paying the utility bill and buying groceries. The loving partner who cared for her partner-in-life coping with Alzheimer's – not wanting the loved one out of their sight. It is what you do out of love. Exhausting. There are many possible experiences Jesus implies as he refers to the ‘poor in spirit.’

That spouse caring for her partner with Alzheimer's. The couple were part of a previous church community I served, and I witnessed often how friends in the congregation would invite the partner to join them for an afternoon; a well-deserved respite, a community connected. In that, and other stories of struggle that brings community together, I wonder if there might be a glimmer of blessing & God's kin-dom.

Image 3: <http://www.hyattmoore.com/egallery/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Bless-Hunger.jpg>

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled”

The artist says on his website that if there is a favourite piece, this would be the one.

Righteousness is a big theological word with many meanings, theologians Walter Brueggemann and N.T. Wright both point out that the Hebrew root for the word “righteousness” means *right standing and consequent right behaviour within a community*. Wright says that righteousness specifically as Jesus uses it in the Gospel of Matthew “is shorthand both for the saving plan of God ... and for the covenantal obligations of [God's] people.”¹

Who are the people that Jesus is describing here? People who recognize first that they are a child of God? In many of his publications, Brueggemann speaks of how God makes a covenant with Israel through Moses, yet often in the Hebrew Scriptures the people forget God's love. They make bad choices. God's people face hardship and forget that God is in charge, yet God, sends prophets over and over again, sometimes with a message of tough love - always, though, with the reminder that God will always honour God's part in the covenant with the faithful.

Those *hungry and thirsty* to be in that *right relationship*

Both with God and the community; righteousness calls us back to those core relationships, in spite of the temptations a person faces to follow other ways. Who might be the people be around you who thirst for right relationships? We as a community of faith, St. Andrew's, trying in earnest to make things right and just with our Indigenous neighbours? Maybe there some of us who are willing to go outside of our comfort zones to build relationship with a person or a group of people that we don't at all understand, maybe they annoy us. Thirsting for righteousness in our relationship both with our Creator and with our neighbours and Creation.

Image 4: <http://www.hyattmoore.com/egallery/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Bless-Peacemakers.jpg>

¹ N. T. Wright <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/righteousness/> and Walter Brueggemann's seminal book, *The Prophetic Imagination* © 2018, Fortress Press.

“peacemakers Blessed are they, they shall be called children of God”

And, Peacemakers – where are they? In our families? In our community or greater global neighbourhood?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said that “True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.”² Making peace is hard work; it always has been. The people of Jesus’ time who worked for the kind of peace that is grounded in justice certainly were not appreciated.

Peacemaking is messy – it disrupts the power systems. That disruption antagonizes the people with privilege and power, but it also agitates the neighbourhood. I will say it whenever I have an opportunity, that the most courageous workers for peace in Palestine were the Israelis who risked arrest, and certainly invited the ire of their Israeli neighbours whenever they crossed the border from Israel into Palestine to support demonstrations for peace.

I met one high-school aged student at an olive tree planting. She told me that she regularly sneaks across from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. At one olive tree planting protest I attended in order to take photos, there was a rare female Hamas politician in attendance. The young Israeli activist I had met took the opportunity to challenge the Palestinian politician about the policies of Hamas towards Israel – It was an extraordinary debate to observe.

Peacemaking, in my experience, goes on in surprising places. Blessed are the people who work for peace rooted in justice. Jesus knew – I think we all know – that our world needs peace. We as a church need to be about speaking truth to power, even as we know that disrupting abusive, oppressive systems may agitate our neighbours and even our families.

Image of Artist and art together: <http://www.hyattmoore.com/egallery/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Garage.jpg>

Artist Hyatt Moore invites you and I to see a bigger picture; God’s kin-dom vision of our world and its skewed values turned upside down. It begins by naming those who are least as blessed. A panoramic view of God’s kin-dom community around which we are called to join.

I wonder: *What would the world be like if those that Jesus called blessed were in charge?*

- the poor in spirit
- those who mourn
- the meek
- those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
- the merciful
- the pure in heart
- the peacemakers
- those persecuted for righteousness’ sake

Imagine!

² *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* © 1982, Stephen B. Oates. Harper & Row, Publishers Inc. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke these words during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955.
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