

A Manifesto of Mercy

Matthew 5:1-12

A life well lived requires both meaning and a manifesto. The need for a sense of meaning is fairly obvious; human beings value life more when it's meaningful to us and to others. Or conversely, it's hard to find bliss when life is meaningless, absurd, and empty.

A manifesto, however, is less obvious to us as for its need, though few of us actually exist without one of sorts. How so? Well, because it's what we believe in and follow—spoken or unspoken, it's what we think is true, right, and appropriate for ourselves and others. A manifesto, in this sense, is a declaration of personal principles, purposes, and directives for one's life and for the world at large—of what we hold as sacred to our conscience and definitive to our conduct. It's a way to describe who we are as a person and what shapes our moral sensibilities. On a daily basis, we give expression to what we think is important, what has value to us, and what gives us a sense of purpose. That, in essence, is a personal manifesto—our moral manifesto, if you will—declaring what we believe is true about life and how we think it should be lived.

History is replete with various manifestos that have defined the course of time: the Declaration of Independence (1776); the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels (1848); *Mein Kampf*—Hitler's manifesto (1925); The Contract with America (1994)—a sampling of some that have shaped our modern world. But a quick online search will reveal a host of less-known manifestos covering just about anything and everything—from art to psychology,

auto mechanics to gardening, and athletic wear to weight loss programs.

One of the notable ones influential to me in my youth was Max Ehrmann's poem, "Desiderata"—found on posters everywhere in the 1960s and 70s. Today you might find the Holstee Manifesto which, likewise, shows up just about everywhere in posters, notecards, websites, etc. as a "feel good" proclamation on life. For me, the Holstee Manifesto is less profound than Desiderata, but it's popular for its quippy, sensible prose.

This is your life. Do what you love, and do it often. If you don't like something, change it. If you don't like your job, quit. If you don't have enough time, stop watching TV. If you are looking for the love of your life, stop; they will be waiting for you when you start doing things you love. Stop over analyzing. All emotions are beautiful. When you eat, appreciate every last bite. Life is simple. Open your mind, arms, and heart to new things and people, we are united in our differences. Ask the next person you see what their passion is, and share your inspiring dream with them. Travel often; getting lost will help you find yourself. Some opportunities only come once, seize them. Life is about the people you meet, and the things you create with them, so go out and start creating. Life is short. Live your dream and share your passion. ¹

Millions of people use this as their daily mantra to inspire them at work, to help them at home, and to keep perspective and meaning in their personal worlds.

But personal manifestos like this, as helpful as they may be, are inadequate for getting beyond the superficialities of most people's lives. They rarely reach down deeper than momentary emotions and fleeting thoughts. The Holstee Manifesto may inspire people who need a little wake-up call from time-to-time; but it won't help those lost in despair, or those who are victims of violence, or struggling

¹ www.holstee.com/manifesto

through most of the dramas and disasters of life—those for whom life is not so simple.

What good is it to tell someone in Oklahoma, whose home and community has been destroyed by a series of tornadoes to “live their dreams and share their passions”? Or to a child living in poverty to “travel often” or “seize opportunities” that lie before them? Or how does a refugee from war understand that “all emotions are beautiful”? What does that mean to those whose lives need more than a little uplift or spiritual tweaking? So a deeper, more meaningful, salve for the soul is called for—something that reaches into the depths of human experience and reorients us from points of despair and hardship. What is needed is a manifesto of mercy.

In my view, the Beatitudes of Jesus are one such manifesto. There’s such a profound depth of meaning and moral challenge to these beautiful words expressed so simply, so poetically. Though there are actually two versions of the Beatitudes—one here in Matthew and the other in Luke, with slight variations between them—Matthew’s is the one with which most people are familiar. If you’re like me, you grew up memorizing these verses as maxims, as something that was to be prized as essential teachings of Jesus. Yet, in the innocence of childhood, I missed the paradoxical meaning of these verses and, thus, they were like memorizing proverbs rather than viewing them collectively as a statement on life and what it should be. I didn’t realize that these nine blessings formed a manifesto.

The Beatitudes came to us through early Christian oral tradition, and they were remembered and retold because Jesus likely

recited them many times to various audiences. In all likelihood, they were a common way for him to convey what he held to be true about God's realm and those to whom he believed God would show favor—blessing them by either reversing their present conditions or honoring them because of the activity to which they were committed. So what we have in the Beatitudes, in all probability, is what Jesus considered the Gospel manifesto.

It's not a coincidence that the first four beatitudes echo the words of Isaiah 61—the very text Jesus used to announce his call to ministry to his home synagogue in Nazareth, as recorded in Luke 4: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news to the poor...” In that proclamation, Jesus asserted his belief that God would fulfill the promises of Isaiah's ancient prophecy—that the poor and those robbed of spirit, those who mourn and sorrow, those who were meek and overlooked, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice would be delivered from their conditions—that God would hear their yearnings and prayers, respond to their needs, and reverse their circumstances and the world's order. It would begin with Jesus, who then reached out to these marginalized people and taught his disciples to do the same.

These subjects of divine favor were not viewed as being particularly blessed in life, or even deserving of divine mercy. They were on the underside of life—those most of society were indifferent to, or scorned for their behavior or state in life or neglected by people out of concern for their own personal welfare. No one with power and influence paid much attention to them; these were the ones the social, political, and religious establishment ignored when considering the

public good. Jesus, of course, didn't buy into the popular prejudices against the downtrodden because he lived among them; so he instructed those who followed his lead to attend to them mercifully, to raise their concerns, and give them reason to have hope. Jesus and his early followers largely defined the focus of their ministry through these Beatitudes. They were addressing the ethics of fairness in the world and siding with those who were usually on the losing end of life's circumstances and public attitudes. That was the paradox: those who seem the least blessed would find their fortunes reversed in the realm of God.

Now if this is Gospel truth, then why would it be any different for us today? Any aspirations you and I have about our own religious beliefs and standing before God could very well be measured by this manifesto of mercy. Namely, this is where we are to place our focus—these are the ones who need a great reversal to take place in their lives and in our present time. What this means is, Christ-like ministry isn't about offering a simplistic, feel-good "Holstee-like" manifesto for taking care of yourself (as the Gospel has come to mean in so many churches); the Gospel hope isn't even primarily directed toward people like us, who do all right over the course of our lives. Nor is Christianity's main purpose about keeping the church as an institution alive and well in the world today as a religious presence to guide our moral sensibilities.

No. If Jesus conveyed his Gospel proclamation as a manifesto of mercy, then it's meant to be a call to action and the focus in our spirituality. The work we are called to as followers is really no different than what the earliest disciples were called to do. It's about

doing the work of God by attending to and reversing the conditions of the poor and giving hope to those whose spirits are crushed and discouraged, comforting those who mourn great losses in their lives, representing the meek, who cannot speak for themselves or be heard in the public square, and advocating for those who yearn for fairness and justice in their life. That is how the poor and poor in spirit experience the great reversal of fortune in the kingdom of heaven; that is how those who mourn find comfort, and how the meek inherit what has been unfairly taken away from them. And it is how those who have been denied justice and treated like the scum of the earth get their just due! It's because people of faith, particularly the church of Jesus Christ—stand up for them and alongside them. We're motivated to do this because of this essential teaching of our faith—a manifesto of mercy—articulated by Jesus and carried out by his earliest followers! This, then, becomes our religious and spiritual calling—our manifesto in life!

Frankly, this is hard and burdensome work, which may be the reason Jesus praises and honors those who take great risks to do this very work of God. This is evident in the next four blessings. Jesus blesses those who are merciful, kind, and compassionate—those who express mercy toward the poor and poor in spirit will receive mercy themselves. He blesses those who are pure in their motivations and intentions to help those in need, not those who take advantage of, manipulate, and exploit those who are naïve, vulnerable, and struggling to find their place in life! Likewise, Jesus praises and honors those who are peacemakers and peacebuilders—those who takes risks to reconcile people and bring justice and healing to their

relationships; and Jesus blesses those who are persecuted for doing any and all of these things—those who are ridiculed, mocked, disrespected, dismissed by a cynical public and harassed and punished by those who have a stake in keeping things as they are—persecuted for doing this good work to help the least of these in society!

As Warren Carter writes:

This is where disciples live, in the midst of the poor in spirit, the mourning, the powerless, and the hungry and thirsty, dominated and exploited by the ruling elite (5:3-6). It is where the community embodies God's [realm] in mercy, purity, peacemaking and persecution as it lives its alternative existence [as salt and light to the world].²

In short, the ministry and mission of the church that follows Jesus Christ is one that embraces and fulfills the intentions of Jesus' manifesto of mercy—what we commonly refer to as The Beatitudes. These aren't words to merely memorize and ponder; they are explicit and challenging instructions for disciples and defining characteristics of the beloved community of Christ.

Often times, I think we get distracted from doing this important Gospel work. We make our faith more about what it does for us than what it does for others. You and I need the One Great Hour of Sharing to remind us of our calling and to recover a sense of what it means to be a Christian in today's world. We're called to identify and share the burden of those who are impoverished materially and spiritually. We're to give of our means to help those who have lost so much in natural disasters and in places that generate refugees and hopelessness. We are to help those who have suddenly suffered a tremendous loss when nature's wrath tore through their property and

² Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, Orbis, 2000, pg.138.

those who lack the means to have property. It's more than humanitarian gestures; it's embracing them with the love and mercy of God.

That's why we give today and why we give of ourselves every opportunity that we can. We want to be where Jesus would be and counted among those who follow his way. When we do so, we shall be counted among the merciful—the holy communion of those who love others as God loves. That in itself is a blessing, and it's a calling, and it's the paradoxical way in which we recognize and embrace the mercies of God that come to us in kind.

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