The Beatitudes Help us Achieve Excellence

A show I've talked about a time or two in my daily Mass homilies is "The Wonder Years," which was one I watched regularly when it was on in the late 80s and early 90s. I was about the same age as all of the characters in the show so could relate to the coming of age storyline.

If you remember the show, Fred Savage played Kevin Arnold, who dealt with family, friends, school, and his feelings of love for Winnie Cooper. The typical things we all go through as teens. Among my favorites were a few episodes where he was trying to learn algebra and was overwhelmed.

In that episode, the adult version of himself who we hear in every episode as a narrator talking as the voice in his head as to what he was thinking of at the time remarks how he'll aim for a B and try to coast through the class. But the teacher on day one starts right off the bat, having the students open their books to learn math. Kevin is quickly nervous and bogged down; but his teacher, Mr. Collins, mentors him and helps him. He gives him the help he needs, but when he sees Kevin can start to do it on his own he backs off a bit, for now it's time for Kevin to take the ball and run. An angry Kevin yells at him saying "I thought you were my friend" to which he replies in my favorite line, "I'm not your friend Mr. Arnold, I'm your teacher." Angry and wanting to give up he throws a test on Mr. Collins desk that he was to have done at home, writing in derogatory comments as opposed to answers, thinking he'll never do it on his own. When he returns to class the next Monday to apologize for his outburst. he learns Mr. Collins died over the weekend of a heart attack. He is crushed, but the fill in teacher says there was a blank test left for him to take Mr. Collins had left. Kevin takes the test and finishes it and looks at the teacher and says "you don't have to correct it, it's an A."

What I love with that story is Mr. Collins knew the tools were there in Kevin to understand the subject. It just took work. And such is it with us.

Sometimes we want to "coast" through our faith journey. I go to Mass, I know some basic prayers, I don't do any of the "biggie" sins, at least not often and if I do I confess them, we say to ourselves. Well that's all well and fine, but God knows we can do better.

And so, as we hear in our Gospel this week, Jesus gives us the Beatitudes. They are great to ponder as a way to ask ourselves, "how can I take my faith to the next level" when pairing them with the 10 commandments.

In the interest of full disclosure, I took these interpretations from Bishop Robert Barron of "Word on Fire," an apologetics website that he runs, and who is the auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, from a homily he gave a few years ago on them. Secondly, in Luke's Gospel we fewer and have the "woes" that follow; Matthew's Gospel gives us the full 8 beatitudes. This is Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" which is the counterpart to Matthews

“Sermon on the Mount” which we have this week at Mass; below are the interpretations from Matthew’s beatitudes but they overlap.

One is by being a person of **mercy** - blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy. God is love itself, and is incapable of not loving. We see this most perfectly in the cross; that self-emptying love of Jesus showing how far God goes for us. We need to challenge ourselves to be a people of mercy and love, to go the extra mile for the people around us, and the people God will put into our lives, to let go of anger and grudges. We receive God’s love in our lives, but it’s meant to be passed on.

A second way, blessed are the **pure of heart**. What is our desire in life? Is it about us, our wants, our needs, our desires? Is our heart divided, focused on glory or power, or money, or being everywhere at once? Or is it clearly focused on God? Is heaven where we ultimately want to be? When our heart is pure, it’s focused on God and we can be people who make God’s love known. We must make sure our heart is not divided.

A third, blessed are those who **hunger and thirst for righteousness**. It’s worth asking what are we hungry for? Related to our heart which can be divided, sometimes we are hungry for the wrong things. For some, these can be sinful things; other things aren’t so much sinful, but just don’t bring us long term happiness. The dream job isn’t so perfect. The bigger house has flaws. Being a grown up has responsibilities. The list goes on and on. So this means asking ourselves do I hunger for what God wants, and what God’s will is. Or is it all about me, my wants, my desires. If we aren’t happy in life, it could be we are hungry for the wrong things.

A fourth, **blessed are the peacemakers**. It can be easy to get hung up on ego, or resentment, or hurt feelings, and to radiate unhappiness. If we let God’s love flow through us, what happens? Good things such as breaking down walls and barriers between people. We help people find peace and joy. A peacemaker means being a person of service. Maybe we can help bring about healing in our families or among friends, or maybe there’s a person in our life who no one notices that needs us to notice them. Again, we aren’t called to just be nice to people, we are called to evangelize, which means meeting people where they are at.

Coupled with these beatitudes that compel us to act, Jesus gives us another set that are things we can live out and avoid to avoid the pitfalls on the way to heaven. Thomas Aquinas would later write that we often find 4 substitutes for God: money, pleasure, power and glory, and the beatitudes also address these.

For one, Jesus says **blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**. This can be thought of as detachment - being detached from material things, which allows us to have room for the love of God in our hearts, and to use what we’ve been given, including our financial resources, to make the world a better place.

Jesus says too **blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted**. This gets at pleasure really; as I heard it translated from Bishop Robert Barron, think of it as

basically how lucky you are if you aren't addicted to or attached to pleasure. Sometimes we have to do difficult things, but if we live out this beatitude, we'll do God's will even if this doesn't always make us joyful. Think of being a parent or a teacher - sometimes there are really trying moments. But a good parent realizes that sometimes part of being mom or dad means loving and helping a child to truly learn and grow. This beatitude helps us to see our vocation through to the end, realizing short term pain can equate to long term gain.

Jesus also says **blessed are the meek**. This means we have to be detached from power. Power and the need for praise can be a seductive drug. People can want power in their family, in their parish, on their committee, in their office, pretty much anywhere. But what all the saints have in common is it is never about them. It is about God and about service. We should challenge ourselves to make sure we don't do things to be noticed, or to get something back, to have control to get "our way" or to get praise to feed our ego, but rather that we do things knowing that God will see them. It also means refraining from gossip, which can give us power or control over a person or over a situation. God sees what we do and our good deeds, and we should do them because we love being His servants and making His love known in the world.

Finally, being meek is also related a bit to being persecuted - Jesus says **blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness**. We should not want to seek out suffering. But we have to be willing to be OK with not being honored, and also OK with even people labeling us or disliking us. When we aren't afraid to speak about being pro-life, to talk about our faith and what we believe in, or to even make someone feel uncomfortable, we live this out. Even if we might not be martyred, we will be labeled for what we believe. But we also just might plant the seeds to help someone grow in their faith.

I must confess, I do not like math. I once had a bad dream I was back in math class but then woke up and realized no I do not have math today and am done with formal education. But the education of my faith goes on. Some days I know I could do better. It's why I pray, I go to confession, and try to grow as a person. But I do know the potential is there because the Master has taught me and continues to do so. So, let us listen to Him and not be contend "just passing" but use every day of our lives to grow in grace as we prepare for our final exam when we will stand before Him.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul