

Sermon about the Beatitudes (Matthew 5, 1-12)
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Barcelona, Saturday 26 June 2010

Do not be afraid!

Be assured that you are not alone – even, and especially if you are humiliated, excluded or even persecuted!

Be assured that you are blessed and protected. God is with you!

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

this short summary of the beatitudes, our gospel today, sounds so easy to say. But it has been enormously provoking and scandalous in Jesus' time,

When Non-Romans were oppressed and people lived in poverty,

When there was little money and medicine for the old and the sick, and the poor were often left alone,

When opponents of the Roman Emperor were persecuted, tortured and even killed.

Jesus' words were provocative and astounding; they caused hope and skepticism, encouragement and fear; in Jesus' time up until today. For these words were and are so different from the human logic of power and strength, hierarchy and authority. Not the strong, rich and beautiful were the first ones to be blessed by Jesus but the poor, the persecuted and the oppressed. How was this to be understood? How was this to be lived?

During the women's preconference of the European Forum in Barcelona we discussed the biblical text in small groups and came up with different ideas, perspectives and questions. Women from Norway, Sweden and Finland, Spain and Malta, Great Britain and Moldova, the Netherlands, the United States and Germany tried to translate the text into our time, into our specific daily lives: Just as Jesus always connected his preaching to the concrete lives of the people around him.

"This text is extremely contradictory and ambivalent!", some of us said. "How can we be encouraged to be active peace makers and advocates for justice and equality for all people – including lesbians and gays, bisexuals and transgender -, and be merciful and weak at the same time? It does not seem to fit together!"

Other women outlined the fact that the beatitudes and other biblical verses were often abused by church leaders over centuries to silence the poor and oppressed by promising them their reward in Heaven.

“What is the use of being rewarded in Heaven if church leaders and other authorities make Christian obedient and passive and discriminate against lesbians and gays and others here on earth with the bible in their hands?”, some of us asked.

“What about homophobia and racism, what about hate speeches and violence against the LGBT community in European churches and elsewhere? Are we supposed to just sit there and not do anything about it because we will be rewarded in Heaven?” The women clearly stated that they cannot happily smile to injustice and discrimination and wait for some cloudy reward in life after death.

“And they do not have to wait for that!”, some other women added firmly. “The text itself says something else: Jesus states with all his preaching and all his doing in his life that people are not living in this world to be marginalized or to suffer. They are blessed and strengthened by God in order to be able to change that. The bible is full of stories where people are empowered to struggle against oppression and to be enabled to do something about it.”

“The Beatitudes are a highlight of empowerment and encouragement”, some women underlined. And they continued: “Yes, the bible knows about the reality of suffering, about the reality of injustice and violence, about the reality of sorrow and mourning, because that is part of real life, too. We are all asked to face that, and to deal with it, and to help one another to change that. That is the main message of the text: Peace building, non violence and struggle for justice belong together, there is no either or! There is no contradiction. For how can we live in peace and be happy and joyful if parts of society are oppressed and excluded?”

Hence, the women concluded that the Beatitudes tell a lot about life and about the attitudes of *how* to live our lives: Jesus encourages us to do what we do with passion, in spite of pain and grief. He encourages us to share our life stories and talk about our dreams and goals honestly and open heartedly and not use the same language our opponents use.

However, for most of the women the most important message of the text is the following: The Kingdom of God can only come if we start working for it today!

In her European Forum lecture in Barcelona Nathalie Reverdin called the Beatitudes the “Magna Charta” of Jesus’ teaching. I agree with her. I even call it a “manifesto against the status quo”; or: a “manifesto against the constructions of normality”; or: a manifesto against the attitude of many who say: well, that’s life and we cannot change it; we just have to accept it the way it is.

In this sense it is a clear and courageous “manifesto of love”!

“No!”, Jesus said.

He pronounced an outcry against injustice and violence, against sorrow and despair. He encouraged all people – the so called majority and the outcasts of his time – to struggle for justice, to involve in peace, to support the persecuted, and to comfort those who mourn and grief. They will be blessed, Jesus stated. They will be called children of God, they will be comforted and supported by God’s presence. That is what he said.

Jesus changed perspectives: He pulled those who are at the margins of society out of invisibility into the center of his attention. Not the majority dictates the direction of our worries and our action but

the needy ones and those at the margins of society. This is Jesus' message: How society deals with its outcasts and minorities actually shows the real face of society. It is the litmus test of humankind. The result of this test, I am afraid would have been shocking in Jesus' time; however, in many regions and societies of today the results would not turn out much better.

In all his actions and appearances Jesus was neither a politician nor a leader of a military corps. Jesus was a courageous Jew. Well educated in the Jewish Holy Scriptures; he was a preacher and a common man who was looking critically and faithfully at daily life around him and tried to change life to the better for the sake of the common people. He ate and celebrated with the social outcasts and prostitutes, with slaves and maids; he reserved time for the sick and the depressed, and he healed many of them. He shared his time with simple people and the poor just as much as with teachers and preachers. He was open to dialogue with all who were interested in fair and respectful debates; he argued with the rich and powerful, and was not afraid of uttering clear and sharp critique of hypocrisy and injustice.

The two apostles Matthew and Luke remembered Jesus "manifesto of love" during his sermon on the mount. They wrote it down into their gospels in times when they as Christians were a minority and threatened by the Romans in the first century after Christ. Matthew was more dealing with the spiritual aspects of the sermon: to act spiritually with a pure heart, with mercy, with hunger for righteousness and peace. And Luke more stressed the blessing for the materially poor, the bodily sick and hungry, and the existentially persecuted. Both traditions of Matthew and Luke were remembered by the first Christians who witnessed Jesus sermons and passed it on orally and in written to the next generations.

In fact, both sides of the medal belong together: the spiritual and the material part of life; the psychological and the physical wellbeing have to be fostered to live a safe life in dignity. This is true up until today, for heterosexuals just as much as for lesbians and gays, bisexuals and transgender people. Hence, Jesus' "manifesto of love" is a document of utmost importance all the way up until today.

Having this in mind I think of a friend of mine. She is a Protestant pastor and lives together with her female partner and her two kids in the minister's house in a town close to Frankfurt in Germany. After long struggles in the Protestant church in Germany, being lesbian and gay *and* a Christian minister is mostly accepted. But having two kids without a clear biological father is too much for many. Traditional family values and family definitions are thrown at them from various colleagues who refuse to work with her; so called Christians flood the online guestbook of the parish and insult my friend violently. They fire at her with the most absurd insults and clichés. They do not even know her, but disrespect her life and her family. And spit hatred over all LGBT in the name of a so called Christian God of rage, homophobia and violence.

"No!", Jesus would have said. This is not acceptable!

And my friend and a whole solidarity group did not accept it. We have found a solidarity group to support her and be present with her in her struggles for justice. We talk to church officials, and set up general debates about rainbow families. The struggle still goes on.

And I think of our friends from Eastern Europe – from Moldova and Romania, from Armenia and Serbia, Russia and Kirgizstan, from Latvia, Ukraine and Belarus and from many other countries where our friends from the European Forum come from. The Catholic and the Orthodox churches officially do not accept LGBT Christians at all. The Protestant and Anglican churches are more open and supportive but often act ambivalently on that matter.

In Eastern Europe and many other places there is little chance to work in the parishes professionally and be openly gay at the same time. There is no chance to have a LGBT partnership blessing in an official church service and there certainly is no official recognition of LGBT Christians at all. There is not much more than blaming, tabooing and excluding. What kind of Christian behavior is this? Well, let me tell you, it isn't any Christian behavior at all!

“No!”, Jesus would have said. This is not acceptable!”

And we have not accepted it in the European Forum. We have set up different activities to support the small but active LGBT networks and groups in Eastern Europe – for instance with training workshops, European presence at Eastern pride parades or with support for rainbow services in Eastern European countries. And we celebrate services like today where we proclaim God's love and respect for all our LGBT families and our friends from North and South, East and West. This is one of the places and times when we - as Ecumenical and European LGBT family - give Jesus' “manifesto of love” concrete faces.

Jesus is clear about it in the Beatitudes: It is neither a message of hatred nor of violence and homophobia. His message is one of self respect and dignity of all humankind – regardless of background, nationality and sexual orientation!

The women in the working groups of the women's preconference of the Forum were just as clear about it as Jesus himself: Respect and mutual acceptance is the only way to disrupt the mechanisms of hatred and violence. There is no alternative to safe spaces where people can exchange their life stories so that they may learn from their differences. There is no alternative to the struggle for justice and to the support of the oppressed and persecuted. There is no alternative to solidarity among LGBT, their families and friends all over the world. And so, we go on with creating safe spaces for all in order to exchange our stories and try to learn from one another. And by doing that we follow the spirit of the Beatitudes: Assure safety and respect for all, and do it with all your heart and soul!

That is why international networks like the European Forum are so important for LGBT all over Europe and beyond. It is our strength to live according to Jesus' “manifesto of love”; to show it openly where ever it is possible, to give love a face, and to pass on Jesus message of respect and dialogue to others so that others may experience it.

That is so much more worthwhile and joyful than hatred and violence.

And we should not forget what Jesus teaches us and what the women's preconference has summarized as the highlight of his manifesto: the kingdom of God can only come, if we start working for it today!

And the peace of Christ may be with you all!

Amen