

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, and  
Celebration our Fifth Anniversary – Sept. 15, 2013

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I have thought about, prayed over, and pondered this celebration for well over a month. I thought of using the gospel reading of the Beatitudes, or the readings for the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross which is celebrated today. Actually our first communal liturgy five years ago fell on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Yet I chose to stay with this Sunday's readings because I believe the type of leadership I saw in Moses typifies what I hope the leadership of the Church of the Beatitudes exemplifies.

When God, in his anger and disappointment tells Moses he has had enough of the stubbornness of his people and wants to destroy them all and make Moses and his descendants into a great nation, Moses pleads with God not to do this. God already made that promise to Abraham and Moses wants to remind God of this. He fights for his people. They are the people of God, warts and all. And God relents.

My brothers and sisters, isn't this what the Second Vatican Council did when it reminded the church that the church is the people of God? And yes, there was jubilation and ex-

citement and weird experimentations, but it was *our* church and we claimed it, warts and all, and there were some bishops that supported and encouraged this kind of church.

But then we experienced a going back into the "way things once were," we witnessed prophetic voices silenced and we labored in vain to keep the concept of the church as the people of God alive. And behold a prophet in Europe appeared and offered to ordain women, who were prepared, to the priesthood and, later, ordained some of these women Bishops. And a way was forged to bring the Church back to the people.

It was a challenge for each of us to discern this new way and to decide if we wanted to cast our lot, so to speak, with this new prophetic movement fraught with excommunication and uncertainty, yet hope-filled and definitely joy-filled.

I found a poem/blessing that I think captures the individual and communal experience of our forming of the Beatitude Community. It is entitled *For a New Beginning*, by John O'Donohue; with an adaptation from the singular to the plural and a change in the last line of the poem.

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,  
Where you thought never to wander,  
This beginning has been quietly forming,  
Waiting until we were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched our desire,  
Feeling the emptiness growing inside us,  
Noticing how we will ourselves on,  
Still unable to leave what we had outgrown.

It watched us play with the seduction of safety  
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,  
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,  
Wondered would we always live like this?

Then the delight, when our courage kindled,  
And out we stepped onto new ground,  
Our eyes young again with energy and dreams,  
A path of plenitude opening before us.

Though our destination is not yet clear  
We can trust the promise of this opening;  
Unfurl ourselves into the grace of beginning  
That is at one with our life's desire.

Awaken our spirit to adventure;  
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;  
Soon we will be home in a new rhythm,  
For our soul senses the church that awaits us.

Last week, the Western region of RCWP gathered in Santa Cruz for our annual retreat. We were blessed to have Michael Fish, a Camaldolese Monk, facilitating. Last year, Michael said he saw us and our movement as a new branch on the Tree of Jesse. This spoke to me so powerfully because it anchored me into our Jewish Tradition. This year, he used another metaphor. He said: You are the new wine, but you do not yet have the new wine skins and you cannot put new wine into old wine skins. His challenge to us was to find our new wine skins. Each of you is part of that challenge. This will be a topic for discernment for several months, perhaps even a year or so.

The *Gospel of Thomas* voices it a little differently. In Logion II we read:

If you are searching, you must not stop  
until you find.  
When you find, however, your confusion  
will give way to wonder.  
In wonder you will reign over all things.  
Your sovereignty will be your rest.

Are we in the period of WONDER right now? I know we were in a time of confusion as we moved from home to library room to First Congregational Church. But we have been here now for just over three years. How do we measure our success?

I think the gospel for today gives us a good clue. In these two parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, Jesus once again juxtaposes the grandiose expectations in the popular mind regarding how the kingdom is expected to appear in our lives, and how it actually appears. The shepherd finally finds his missing sheep and the woman her missing coin. That is the extent of God's intervention. Thus the kingdom is identified with the ordinary. The woman did not win the state lottery prize. Nor did the shepherd find another whole herd of sheep. They found only what they had lost. Jesus undermines grandiose expectations of all kinds. Perhaps that is a clue for us to ponder as we celebrate our five years together. It has been quite ordinary and quite extraordinary at the same time.

Each of us has had to take our own walk through our own new beginning. John O'Donohue reminds us that when the heart is ready for a fresh beginning, unforeseen things can emerge. A beginning is an opening for surprises. Beginnings are new horizons that want to be seen; they are not regressions or repetitions. Somehow they win clearance and become fiercely free of the grip of the past.

We, the Catholic Church of the beatitudes, have made a new beginning. In many ways, we are still fledglings. Yet we know we are free of the grip of the past. How we walk

into the future is another matter. I hope it will be in very ordinary ways, like beginning a Taizé prayer ministry, and a ministry for divorced women, and walking with our safe parking women, and helping with laundry love, and being concerned about our incarcerated young people, and being ready to begin a Christian education program for our children. These are concrete things we are engaged in. But let me remind you: we are walking into the future and we know not where it will take us. I'd like to end with another poem by Philip Booth from his book of poetry, *Selves*. It is called *Heading Out*

Beyond here there's no map.  
How you get there is where you'll arrive;  
How, dawn by dawn, you can see your way clear:  
In ponds, sky, just as woods you walk through give to fields.  
And rivers: beyond all burning, you'll cross on bridges  
You've lugged with you.  
Whatever your route, go lightly, toward light.  
Once you give away all save necessity, all's mostly well:  
What you used to believe you owned is nothing,  
Nothing beside how you've come to feel.  
You've no need now to give in or give out:  
The way you're going your body seems willing.  
Slowly as it may otherwise tell you,  
Whatever it comes to you're bound to know.

This poem speaks to me of the stripping of physical baggage, emotional baggage and identity baggage. This is what each one of us had to do to engage this new way of being Church. Congratulations to each of you. You have taken this walk to the place where there are no maps.

Let's continue to create this map together. Let us continue to share our collective wisdom as we walk boldly into our evolving future. Happy Anniversary to each of you and may we all be together for our tenth anniversary.

## RELATED PRAYERS USED AT THIS LITURGY

### **Opening Prayer**

O Gentle God, we gather in praise and thanksgiving this evening as together we ponder the meaning and celebration of our fifth anniversary. Open us to the wonder of surprise as we thank You for these five years and anticipate the next five years. May our hearts open wide to the blessings of this Eucharist and may we anticipate the transformations possible as we gather in prayer and celebration. We ask this through Jesus the Christ.

### **Prayer over the Gifts**

Accept, O God of Celebration, our gifts of bread and wine, food for the hungry, and monies for the on-going growth of our Beatitude Community. Transform these gifts as you transform each of us gathered around this table. We ask this through Jesus the Christ.

### **Closing Prayer**

We have been fed, O Loving Presence, and now we prepare to take leave. Give us wisdom as we prepare to bring to our needy world the gifts you have given us in this Eucharist. Our hearts spill over in gratitude for our five years together and for the generosity of the members of First Congregational Church. We ask that Pastor Ron and his wife, Peter and Joanna, Karen and please come forward as representatives of the members of First Congregational Church.

## **PRAYER OF BLESSING**

From the center of our beings, we praise and thank you, Gracious God, for the generous hospitality of our friends here at First Congregational Church.

We thank each of you for the part you have played in providing us with a home to hold our worship services, our many and varied meetings and our celebrations.

We thank each of you for your on-going support and friendship. In many ways, you have become a part of the fabric of our community.

We ask our Gentle God to bless each of you abundantly and to bless your whole community. May your generosity to us be richly rewarded. And may our friendship continue to blossom and grow.

Please accept this gift of an orchid plant as a small token of our deep and heartfelt gratitude to you. Place it on your altar or in you sanctuary tomorrow during your worship service as a sign of our presence with you in spirit.

## **Blessing for the Community**

In gratitude, in deep gratitude, for this moment, for our shared meal together, we pray the following blessing:

May our Lord Jesus Christ be with you to support you,

Within you to keep you,

Before you to lead you,

Beside you to guard you,

And above you to bless you.

We ask this in the name of God the Creator,

Jesus our brother and the Holy Spirit. Amen.