

THE HIGHER CALL

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Grace Church in New York
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From the book of the Prophet Micah: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

One evening earlier this month I was over at the high school to see a class presentation that involved one of my sons. The course was entitled *Crisis and War in Modern Europe*, and the evening's program featured various clusters of students telling stories from World War Two as if they were there, in the moment. One vignette told of a German ace fighter pilot named Franz Stigler. Stigler grew up in the years between the two world wars, and from early on he was fascinated by flight. He eventually became a commercial pilot and a flight instructor. As war clouds loomed on the horizon, the day came when the German Air Force drafted Stigler, and put him in the cockpit of one of their deadliest fighters, the ME 109. What was required of Stigler? Shoot down the enemy planes that were bombing German cities and killing his countrymen. This he did with devastating efficiency. He was one of their best, an ace.

One December day in 1943 Germany was under heavy attack. Stigler had landed his fighter for refueling, rearming, and minor repairs. Just as he was ready to go again he saw a crippled American bomber at low altitude, painfully trying to make its way out of German air space and to safety. Stigler quickly took to the air in pursuit of the plane, knowing that if he downed one more bomber he'd be awarded a medal called the Knight's Cross. As he drew close behind the B-17, Stigler was surprised that its crew did not shoot at him. But his bigger surprise was the condition of the plane. How could this thing be flying at all? One of the four engines was knocked out altogether, and of the remaining three, only one was functioning at full power. The nose cone and tail were largely blown away, and the fuselage had so many large holes in it that Stigler could see the crew inside, tending to the wounded.

Something clicked inside of Stigler. He felt the rosary beads in his pocket, and knew it would be no honor to shoot down this defenseless plane. He drew up alongside the bomber's pilot, and motioned for him to land. The bomber flew on. He tried to point to the safety of neutral Sweden, even shouting "Sweden." The bomber pilot didn't understand. Stigler guessed that the B-17 was headed for the North Sea, but German coastal air defenses would easily blow it out of the sky before they ever made it. What was required of him? Stigler knew it was time to answer the higher call of the Knight's Cross, even if it meant never obtaining the medal. He would fly in formation with the wounded bomber, and escort it through the German defenses, trusting they would not shoot on one of their own. This he did, and over the North Sea, saluted the stunned pilot of the B-17, who made it back to England and lived to see another day.

What does the Lord require of us? In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (5:1-12) we've heard the Beatitudes, perhaps the most familiar passage in all of the New Testament. We think we know what the Beatitudes mean, but actually, the closer we look at them, the more they defy any easy interpretation or application. When Jesus pronounced a series of blessings on various sorts and conditions of humankind, did he mean to create a template, or a "to-do" list for discipleship? Or was he identifying whom God favors? Or was he holding out promises of a future reward? In other words, are the Beatitudes good news or good advice? One of the blessings of being an Episcopalian is that you can respond to questions like this simply by saying, "Yes." The answer is not either-or, it is both-and.

Clearly, when Jesus pronounced blessings on the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the persecuted, and the reviled, he meant to convey good news to those who have been shot up by life. Something clicks within God when God sees the bruised and battered children of earth trying to limp toward safety, out of harm's way, out of grief. God has a special concern for the lowly, and promises them comfort. At the same time, when Jesus pronounced blessings on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, on the merciful, on the pure in heart, and on the peacemakers, he was issuing more than good advice, but marching orders to his disciples. When Franz Stigler decided not to fire upon, but even escort to safety the wounded bomber, he believed he was answering a higher call. In fact, that's the name of a recent book about the incident: [A Higher Call](#). Likewise, the Beatitudes represent the higher call for Christians. They are a multifaceted blessing because through them we see the mind of Christ, which is an open window into the very character and nature of God.

If the Beatitudes do represent the mind of God, then such things as mercy, peacemaking, and hungering for righteousness should be the higher call not only of Christians alone, but the higher call of everyone on earth. Perhaps so, but it's no secret that many shrink from the demand. The Beatitudes are too high and too difficult to reach. The higher call would have us be merciful to our enemies, and overcome what is often our first and a more powerful instinct: to take vengeance upon them. Stigler became an ace fighter pilot to avenge the death of his only brother, who was also a pilot. It was easier to do his job if the line between friend and foe was absolutely clear. Likewise, when the damaged bomber landed safely in the England, the American pilot and crew were forbidden to tell the story. To suggest that a German fighter pilot had a heart and humanity would only muddy the waters, and damage the war effort. So the higher call is perhaps too high for some in its insistence that we humanize, not demonize our enemies.

The higher call is also not the way the world works. Yes, it's nice to preach good news to those who are oppressed, but many die without ever seeing justice. Many who mourn go to their graves without ever finding their way out of grief. Queen Victoria of England comes to mind. Twenty years into her 63-year reign, her beloved husband Albert fell ill and died. One reading of history is that she never recovered from her grief. For the next forty years she wore black, and left instructions that only when she herself died was her body to be dressed in white, and her head adorned with her wedding veil. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted? Queen Victoria never found it in this life.

Perhaps the good news that Jesus announced in the Beatitudes is only to be realized in the next life. If so, then this life is merely something to be waited out and endured. Yes, it's possible to find enjoyment here and there, but little can be done to change the forces that are beyond all of our control. So why bother? What will be in the end will be. It could be that such an attitude of aloof resignation lies behind today's Old Testament reading from Micah (6:1-8). Micah was a prophet who preached in the vicinity of Jerusalem eight-hundred years before Jesus. It was a troubled time for the people of God. If this were a high school class it would be called *War and Crisis in Ancient Palestine*. The mighty Assyrians had recently sacked the northern kingdom of Israel, and it's not unreasonable to imagine that a river of refugees had come pouring into Jerusalem. Where would they stay? What would they eat? Who would provide for them? Meanwhile, the only way that the rulers of Judah had devised to hold off the Assyrians was to pay them an enormous tax. They sold themselves as a vassal state into the service of the stronger, foreign power.

Most of the prophets were clear that the people had brought their troubles on themselves. The north had strayed from their covenant relationship with God, and courted disaster by trying to play power politics with the Assyrians. In the south they overlooked their brothers and sisters in need and tried to pretend that all was well. In all this a few brave souls had dared to ask, "What does the Lord require of us?" Some reasoned: perhaps we can hold back God's further wrath with

burnt offerings, ten-thousand rivers of oil, even our first born children – the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul. It was in answer to such musings that Micah thundered a reply: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

If the Beatitudes are among the most familiar words in the New Testament, Micah's one sentence in today's reading may hold a similar place of honor in the Old Testament. It could be that Jesus himself had Micah in mind when he formulated the Beatitudes. Both suggest a paradox. Both imply that the way to ascend into the presence of God is by descending into the pain and suffering of the world. Both insist that the only way to answer the high calling is to empty yourself and come down, as God in Christ came down in the form of a servant. It is to look through the wounds of the afflicted and see the person – or perhaps even God – inside. *Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the persecuted and reviled.* And then it is to answer the higher call: *Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers.*

Do the Beatitudes come naturally? Is it possible to answer the higher call by our own strength of will? Some are better at it than others, but what the Christian faith says is that we all need help from God. In the cockpit of his ME 109, Franz Stigler felt the weight of his rosary in his pocket, and something clicked in his soul that restored his lost identity. For you and me here today, perhaps the bread and wine of the Eucharist will be the things that call us back to the life that really is life. In the Communion we share, some may think we are merely repeating by rote a ritual for the sake of ritual. But others will perceive the drama of emptying ourselves so that Christ may fill us. You see, we leave our old selves behind in our pews. We leave our accomplishments and grudges behind, and we come to the altar rail only as lowly sinners who hunger and thirst for the gift of Christ. In the bread and wine, God fills us with the life of Jesus. He lives in us and we in him. God fills us with the Spirit. Then we return again to our pews as new creatures, able to answer the high calling, able to do all things through him who strengthens us.

On that December day in 1943, when Franz Stigler landed his plane, had he told anyone what he did he might have been court-martialed and put in front of a German firing squad. So he kept silent, but always wondered if the B-17 made it back to England. Likewise, the American pilot, whose name was Charlie Brown, always wondered about the German fighter who not only spared his life, but escorted him to safety, and saluted him over the North Sea. Who was he? Why did he do what he did? Finally in 1980, by putting inquiries out through various channels, the two men made contact with each other. Against all odds the B-17 had landed safely, and both men had survived the war. The scene of their reunion was everything you might imagine it to be. Words of thanks poured from Brown, even as he admitted that no words could ever express the fullness of his gratitude to Stigler for not pulling the trigger when the two were enemies. Now in the twilight of their lives they became fast friends. At length Brown introduced Stigler to his other surviving crewmen, who all embraced him, and gave thanks on behalf of all of their descendants who knew life because he had spared their plane.

For his part, Stigler claimed that he was the one who had been blessed. He had lost a brother, but the men he saved became as precious to him as the one he'd lost. Franz Stigler never received the Knight's Cross, but his reward was something far greater and eternal: his soul.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.