

Be happy: Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

by [Patricia Farris](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

When Sister Mary Corita was asked to submit a piece of her artwork for consideration in the Vatican exhibit at the 1964 New York World's Fair, she chose to do a piece on the Beatitudes. Although it was not finally selected for the exhibit, the 4' by 40' banner is a dynamic, vibrant testament to Christ's message. Splashed with vivid color and dense with text, Corita's work pulses with the power of blessing, and expands to embrace the wide scope of the coming kingdom of God.

Sister Corita introduces the text by noting that "On a mountain, Christ said these words, the Beatitudes. Ever since then men have said these words to each other each time with different gestures. Said yes, this is how it should be. This is the way to be happy."

Here is her translation of the Beatitudes:

Happy are those who feel their spiritual need for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Happy are the gentle for the whole world belongs to them. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for what is right for they will be satisfied. Happy are those who show mercy for mercy will be shown to them. Happy are those who know what sorrow means for they will be given courage and comfort. Happy are the single-hearted for they will see God. Happy are those who make peace for they will be known as the sons of God. Happy are those who have suffered persecution for the causes of goodness for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

The Beatitudes place our lives in the context of the whole realm and scope and community of God's love and justice. More description than instruction, more report than directive, they compose a litany in which all promises point to the same reality. Speaking of those who have already "crossed over," those who even now inhabit the kingdom of God, the first part of each beatitude identifies who is blessed and the second part names that group's relationship to God. And the Beatitudes turn the world upside down with their shocking promise of hope to the hopeless, comfort to the bereaved, power to the powerless. A powerful antidote to the contrived

happiness of consumerism and mindless entertainment of our day, they are good news to God's people, the humble of the earth, the strong of heart, those who take refuge in God alone. Yes, this is the way it should be. This is the way to be happy.

The prophet Micah said something quite similar using different words: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

For several months last year, the nun's banner hung in the front of the Kresge Chapel at the Claremont School of Theology as part of a retrospective exhibit "The Power of Corita." I was there to teach a class last year, and one day I spent an afternoon alone in the chapel with the banner, contemplating its message and power. Each beatitude is framed with a bold color—yellow, orange, cobalt, magenta—and a compelling quote. Dostoevsky, Hammarskjöld, Brecht, Einstein, Pauling, Merton, José Martí, James Baldwin, Anne Frank, John F. Kennedy—I heard them all speaking to me. The great cloud of witnesses. Urgent. Compelling.

Their words and lives weave together the spiritual and the political, the personal and the collective, the individual and the universal, the holy and the human. For a few minutes on that afternoon, the world felt whole. I remembered the call to ordained ministry and that, as we United Methodists would say, the purpose of ministry has everything to do with our calling to "reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."

Brendan Freeman, a Trappist monk from Iowa, says that the Beatitudes "draw our hearts out of themselves into a new way of understanding our lives . . . they are deliberately incomplete. They await the inclusion of our lives. Each person fills in the blank space with the details of his or her own life situation."

So what of us, we who would be disciples of Jesus Christ and serve the kingdom in this time of war and violence, of hunger and homelessness, of increasing poverty and marginalization in the glare of riches and greed, of death in war abroad and in our streets at home? Corita's vibrant spectrum takes us far beyond our limited vision. And in her spirit we ask ourselves again: What gestures are we to make now to accompany these words? What commitments? What risks? What dreams?

Sister Mary Corita chose to answer these questions with the words of William Sloane Coffin: "Because we love the world, we pray now, O [God], for grace to quarrel with it, O Thou whose lover's quarrel with the world is the history of the world . . . Lord,

grant us grace to quarrel with the worship of success and power . . . to quarrel with all that profanes and trivializes [people] and separates them . . . number us, we beseech Thee, in the ranks of those who went forth from this place longing only for those things for which Thou dost make us long, [those] for whom the complexity of the issues only served to renew their zeal to deal with them, [those] who alleviated pain by sharing it; and [those] who were always willing to risk something big for something good . . . O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire.”

Yes. This is the way it should be.