

When I went to seminary, Ron Hals was my Old Testament professor. Ron was what my dad would have called “a real character.” He was tall and lanky. His facial features were pointed. He always had a burr haircut, not much maintenance required. His clothes were always badly out of style, but he didn’t give a rip. When something he talked about was a bit surprising, he would say, “Who would have thunk?” He was odd. He was funny. He was phenomenally bright.

Ron loved the Old Testament, and he caused his students, at least one like me, to love it themselves. He was the first scholar to introduce me to what he called gate liturgies or entrance liturgies, public words that were spoken in the Old Testament time when the community entered a place, gathered at a gate, particularly of the temple. Before you went in, you see, you said some things as a community.

Sometimes those things communicated the values and expectations of the community whose worship you were now about to become a part of. We see that in our Psalm for today. It begins with these words: “O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” The holy hill is the temple. The tent is also probably a reference to the temple.

In other words, who can come into this temple? Who is worthy to enter the presence of God? These are the kinds of questions that gate liturgies often posit. Now you and I get a little nervous when we hear these kinds of questions. And we should because we know of communities that have worked hard to keep people out. Black folks have been and are kept out of country clubs, fraternal and social organizations, and yes, even churches. Women have been and are kept out of Old Boys’ Clubs. All kinds of people have been thought to be unworthy to enter certain places and communities. And many of us find

that abhorrent. So, our dander gets up when we hear questions about who is worthy to enter.

And we are especially bothered when we hear the first portion of the Psalm's response to the questions of worthiness, a response that perhaps a priest would yell out at the gate liturgy: "those who walk blamelessly and do what is right."

"Uh oh," we exclaim. Only those who do right are welcome, we question? Well, that leaves us out. We aren't blameless. Actually, that leaves a whole lot of people out. So, are gate liturgies public expressions of exclusion? The only people who are welcome are the ones who behave?

Truthfully, a lot of communities have acted that way. They have developed a list of behaviors that must be followed in order for people to be truly welcomed. In the past, a lot of divorced people, a lot of alcoholics experienced in the church a message of great exclusion and judgment. You haven't behaved as we thought you should have. Are exclusion and judgment what gate liturgies want to express?

Well, certainly they have been used that way. But I can guarantee you that when Israel spoke these entrance liturgies there weren't scorekeepers with their scorepads standing there, ready to communicate who can stay on the island and those who are being cast off the island. Shar goes. Paula stays.

These liturgies weren't attempts to divide and chastise. They were means to express the vision of the community and the expectations for communal life. Here, in other words, not everything goes. Here, we operate in a certain way.

It is very intriguing to note what that certain way is, as described by the Psalm for today. For the Psalmist, the expectations for communal life have to do with how people are treated. Who is welcome in the temple, that is, the presence of God? Those who do not

slander with their tongues, do not do evil to their friends, those who don't rejoice over a neighbor's misfortune, those who stand by their oaths, even if that standing costs them, those who do not lend money at interest, those who don't take a bribe against the innocent.

What do we expect around here? You treat people well. You don't take advantage of them. And note what is not included in the list? Prescriptions against moral naughtiness or advice regarding right ritual preparations. You know, you got to do all the religious stuff right, do the right kind of prayers, give the right amount of money, do the rituals as the community does them.

The prophet Micah makes it completely clear in the first reading that that is not what God wants. What do you think God is after, he asks? Burnt offerings, offerings of thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil, enough money to build a new building for God or to get your name on a plaque somewhere at the church?

No, what God wants is that you do justice, love love, love kindness, and walk attentively with God. What God wants is that you treat people well, that you care for the poor, that you help create a society in which the vast differences between the haves and the have nots are reduced, that you focus on the ways of God, which are ways of justice and compassion.

The realm of God, the kingdom of heaven Matthew calls it, has a certain shape. It is not a reality, a community in which anything goes. There are expectations for communal life. Gate or entrance liturgies make that clear. Now, we must be prepared though, to be totally surprised by the expectations, especially as they are brought to us by Jesus.

I think that the beatitudes that we receive today from Matthew are in many ways a gate liturgy. I've always wondered how we could allow them to be such. These words that are the beginning of

Matthew's sermon on the mount give us a picture of how the Christian community operates. They provide us a vision for our life together.

I think it is interesting to note that in Matthew's gospel it appears that Jesus taught the beatitudes to his disciples, in ear shot of the *crowds*. These are words intended for his disciples, with the hope that maybe others will hear them and want to join the movement. It's as if he is saying to his disciples, "This is how we operate around here." For us, the poor and those who walk alongside of them (the poor in spirit) are blessed. For us, those who know loss of any kind, those who are on the underside of life and society—they are blessed. For us, those who have no land, those who don't have what brings security and honor in a society, the meek, Jesus calls them—they are blessed; they will inherit the earth.

For us, those who practice mercy, are actively compassionate, are the blessed. For us, the pure in heart, those who have rid themselves of the junk that keeps them internally divided are the blessed. For us, those who are peacemakers, who bring people together, but not like the Romans did by means of oppression and weapons—they are the blessed. For us, the persecuted are the blessed. Why, of course they are! We Jesus followers focus our lives on a rejected one. The gospels tell us that Jesus *had* to be rejected, *had* to be crucified.

Around here, those who are honored are those who are down and out, rejected, destitute, those without a home, those who don't have it all together, those who know the power of loss. Around here, those who are honored are those who are yearning for a world where all are honored and none are shamed. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

For me, these words from Matthew's Jesus are the first words that need to be spoken for the sake of community life. They ought to be

our gate liturgy. I am going to suggest that from here on during this year of Matthew we begin our worship with his beatitudes.

Martin Luther dealt with the beatitudes by suggesting that they were a matter of law that revealed to us how we don't measure up. My Facebook friend John Petty claims that Martin Luther says that just about everything. What if these words of Jesus are not means to make us feel guilty but means to reveal to us what life in the reign of God looks like? Around here, things aren't like what they are in the rest of the world. Around here, those who fail, those who have made mistakes, those who are deep in loss, those who are depressed, those whose homes don't make it on magazine covers—they aren't despised. They are honored. They are our friends. They are us. Blessed are us and they.

Perhaps trusting that is what it means to walk blamelessly and do what is right!