

# The Beatitude pastor

Duane Beck

**T**he old Paul Simon song of the 1960s, “Bridge over Troubled Water,” still stirs my pastoral soul.

*When you're down and out,  
When you're on the street,  
When evening falls so hard  
I will comfort you.  
I'll take your part.  
When darkness comes  
And pain is all around,  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down.*

Chronic suffering is a continuous stream of troubled water. Many congregations include people who have experienced the

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undertow of unending suffering from chronic diseases, disabilities, disorders, abuse, and addictions. One of the joys of being a pastor is walking with people of every life stage as they maneuver through the expected changes and the vicissitudes of life. We are witnesses to the generous grace of Jesus. But in helpless situations, how do pastors help? And where is wisdom for the unanswerable questions? Pastors who bridge the troubled waters of long-term, no-answer chronic suffering sometimes wonder if they will hold up under

the weight. County road crews sometimes erect signs: Warning: Load limit 3 tons. Perhaps pastors should erect such signs at church entrances! From where comes our help—help to strengthen our pastoral infrastructure to handle heavy loads?

Temptations abound for those who pastor the long-suffering: to become the fixer, or the one needing to be needed, or the hero swooping in (in all humility, of course) to save. We are tempted to over-function and end up doing for others what they can do for themselves, thus reducing their dignity. Chronic suffering sucks dry the wells of compassion; we don't have the energy to face another person with persistent needs. Pastors who have prayed fervently and seen no change know their silent disillusionment with God. They may doubt the depth of their faith and even question their pastoral call. We have felt our anger, judgment, and rejection surface when the sufferer doesn't follow our wise counsel.

Similar temptations abound on a corporate level for congregations feeling the impact of chronic suffering: trying to fix, trying harder, feeling anger and fatigue and disillusionment, avoiding.

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How, in addition to carrying the load of individual pastoral care, do pastors lead the church to be the body of Christ to one another? Where can pastors turn for help in situations of chronic suffering?

The answer, as Moses said, is "very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."<sup>1</sup> It is in our spiritual center, where our self-identity meets Christ. Our self-identity is crucial to how we relate to those

with chronic suffering. Who we are—our own suffering (or lack thereof), our family system's response to suffering, our sense of pastoral call—shapes our pastoral responses. Central to our personal and pastoral identity is our conversion to Christ and our ongoing transformation into Christ-likeness. Or as Paul puts it, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19b–20).

Eugene Peterson writes that pastoral identity is shaped around the sixth ordination vow (in his Presbyterian tradition): "Will you, in your own life, seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?"<sup>2</sup> While the other ordination vows refer to tasks unique to the pastoral office, this vow, really the baptismal vow of all Christians, seems especially crucial for pastors. Our pastoral person and work are authentic and fruitful as long as *in our own life* we keep building

on this one foundation of Jesus Christ. We know this truth, and yet perfectionism, the tyranny of the urgent, and compassion fatigue all militate against living this basic baptismal vow.

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sometimes easier to read books and attend seminars, but it is out of our spiritual center that we minister to those in the long season of endless suffering. How can spiritual formation strengthen the central pillar of our personal and pastoral lives? What helps us hold chronic suffering in our heart without being consumed by it?

The Beatitudes have been a wonderful resource for renewing my overloaded inner spiritual-psychic infrastructure. They have become a spiritual gyroscope to maintain pastoral balance in the dizzy cycles of suffering. And they provide practical pastoral wisdom for caring for those who suffer long.

### **The Beatitude path**

One teacher of the Beatitudes has noted the simple God-with-us theme at the beginning and end of Matthew's story of Jesus: at his conception, "They shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us,'" and in Jesus' last words to his followers, "And remember, I am with you always."<sup>3</sup> God-with-us permeates the story of Jesus and the whole of scripture from Genesis to Revelation. It needs to permeate our personal story as well. The Beatitudes open our spiritual lungs to inhale deeply "God with us" and exhale gently "God with us" in our pastoral care. Edwin Hatch's 1878 hymn text is a wonderful God-with-us prayer song:

*Breathe on me, breath of God,  
fill me with life anew,  
that I may love what thou dost love,  
and do what thou wouldst do.*

Loving as God loves and doing what God does is finally what pastoring is about.

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, God-with-us becomes concrete as Jesus touches a leper, an untouchable out-cast, a chronic sufferer (Matt. 8:1–4). As we invite Jesus to touch our unhealed and untouchable parts, we are able to embody the reign of God and touch others.

Several Beatitudes are particularly helpful to guide pastoral care of others and our care of self.

**Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

People who suffer long term do not have the spiritual resources to change their situation. But these poor-in-spirit ones are often unaware that they hold the gift of the kingdom. It is a pastoral act to notice and name signs of the kingdom of God in their lives. I quietly told Jane, who suffers from depression complicated by mental challenges, that I had just seen Jesus. Jane had spontaneously given her locket and soothed a belligerent, fearful thirteen-year-old whose mother had just been hospitalized as a precaution against suicide.

Poor-in-spirit pastors do not spend much time trying to fix long-term suffering; we don't have the spiritual resources. Instead we look to the Spirit of God to fill our emptiness and our powerlessness. A simple Beatitude prayer, "I trust you, God," begins to clear our anxiety and our impulse to fix and opens the window to receiving the Spirit's presence. Poor-in-spirit pastors can say, "I don't have a clue; let's sit quietly and listen. Perhaps God will say something." One day in poor-in-spirit silence, God spoke, and the sufferer heard Elvis sing, "You'll never walk alone." The biblical promise of God's presence was echoed by Elvis!

**Blessed are they who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.**

Chronic sufferers grieve many losses. Thank God for Psalm 13 ("How long, O Lord?"), Psalm 22 ("Why have you forsaken me?"), Psalm 77 ("I cry aloud to God"), and other scriptural laments that provide words for numbed minds and turn grieving toward God. The fruit of lament is hope, as witnessed in Lamentations 3:21–26:

*But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.*

Thank God for the gift of a community that can mourn. Paul reminded the Corinthian church that we console one another in the way that God has consoled us: “Blessed be ... the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Cor. 1:3–4). Widows comfort widows; parents comfort parents; the addicted comfort the addicted; the childless comfort the childless. Thus the church embodies God’s gift of comfort.

In listening and loving these chronic sufferers, pastors accumulate heavy loads. We need to grieve and release these loads. Mourning pastors learn to turn their grief toward God, listen for hope, and find rest from the heavy burdens.

**Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.**

Pain has a way of absorbing energy and focusing the mind. Tales of woe can consume the conversation, driving people away. But people really do want an identity beyond their suffering. Meekness provides such an identity. Meekness is not acquiescence; rather it is a strong action, for the meek seek to do God’s will. The third step in the twelve-step Alcoholics Anonymous program shows the path to an identity beyond suffering: “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

This Beatitude, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,” provides pastoral wisdom and renewal of energy as well. To guide a person toward living in God’s will during the time of suffering provides a fresh alternative to the theological riddle of whether this suffering is God’s will. The ones who suffer can begin to focus their attention on ways they might touch others as they have been touched by Jesus’ love. Are there people in the congre-

gation or neighborhood who have similar sufferings, to whom they might offer consolation? Can support groups be initiated around common chronic issues? Those suffering join the pastor in caring for a wider circle of people.

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**

People search far and wide for answers. As the Gospel writer reports of the woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years, “She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.” She reached out in hopeful desperation and touched Jesus’ robe (Mark 5:25–34).

Chronic sufferers are often powerless and are drained of the energy needed to fight their battles. Pastors who thirst for righteousness do not carry the burdens alone. They are alert to systems of support in the church community and in the community at large. They ask which systems of care are helpful and which ones only add to the pain. Pastors use the power of their office to find a way into impersonal, overloaded systems; they become interpreters making coherence out of confusion and help agencies communicate with one another for the benefit of those who are suffering.

**Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.**

Ezekiel comes to the refugees suffering by the river Chebar: “And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days. At the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me” (Ezek. 3:15–16). Sitting with those who suffer gives pastors a place to hear the voice of God. Sometimes it is a word for the suffering one, and sometimes it is a word for the pastor. Once, in worship, after prayers for healing, one of the sufferers for whom we had prayed spoke up, “The preacher looks tired; I think we ought to pray for him.” The suffering worshipers sensitive to my need prayed; I experienced rest and renewed strength. I received God’s mercy.

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

An answer that a pastor is never to give, but one that may be

found by those who suffer, is that suffering is redemptive. Contemplation of the suffering Christ is as important as contemplation of the healing Christ. Conversation, prayer, scripture, and the worshiping community help draw attention to suffering as one of God's gifts of redemption. This last Beatitude promises that the gift given the persecuted is nothing less than the kingdom of heaven, which is the same gift received by the poor in spirit, according to the first Beatitude. The Beatitude paths we walk with those who suffer bring us full circle, back to the reign of God and the spiritual resources given by Jesus.

### **The heart of the matter**

The heart of pastoral response to chronic suffering lies in the heart of the pastor. Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive" (John 7:37–39). Rivers of living water provide sustenance in the midst of the troubled waters of chronic suffering.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 30:11–20 is the exhortation to choose life by loving God, walking in God's ways, and observing God's commandments.

<sup>2</sup> Marva J. Dawn, Eugene H. Peterson, and Peter Santucci, *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Challenge for First World Christians* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 153.

### **About the author**

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