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Beatific Life

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You could say Molly Bruce Jacobs had it all. She was born to a wealthy and affluent family in Baltimore, Maryland in the late 1950's. As a child, she said she believed she was a sort of princess: her family ate dinner by candlelight after cocktails every evening, her parents entertained the important people in the community, and her father was on his way to becoming the editor in chief of a prominent newspaper. Molly grew up to have everything anyone could ever want, and later earned degrees from elite universities, including a law degree that led to a prestigious career as a lawyer. She was married and had two children. A woman no one would hesitate to call successful.

Yet there was so much more to Molly. Behind the façade of prestige, Molly was hurting. In addition to being an alcoholic, Molly was unhappy in her marriage and hated her work as a lawyer. It all came crashing down on her, and after her divorce, after leaving her work, and after becoming sober, Molly was talking with her therapist as she worked through what was at the painful root of her unhappiness, when she blurted out, she had a sister she had never met.

This confession led Molly to tell her therapist about her family's secret. The sister who had been born and immediately diagnosed with hydrocephalus and intellectual disabilities that made the doctors believe the baby would die before she was a year old. Molly's parents were advised, as was unfortunately the common practice in the late 1950's, to not get attached to this baby, and put her in a hospital instead. Her parents complied. But the baby girl, whose name is Anne, was so much stronger and so much happier than anyone could have diagnosed. She lived. She grew. She thrived. Despite this, her parents continued to follow the common practice concerning children like this at that time and put Anne in a type of nursing home facility. And while they believed Anne received appropriate care, her family did not talk about her. Her parents rarely visited her. Molly didn't even know about her sister until her parents told her about Anne when Molly was 13 years old. But it wasn't until she was 38 years old and struggling with many problems that Molly realized she wanted to meet the sister no one in her family talked about.

Although she was nervous to meet the family secret, Molly and her sister hit it off immediately. At first, meeting and getting to know Anne was about correcting what Molly believed was a wrongdoing by her parents. But then, after they got closer, Molly recognized in Anne so much of what she herself was missing from her affluent life: joy, delight, humbleness, kindness. Molly observed Anne had a joy of life she had never experienced, and just by being with Anne, Molly found herself experiencing things like love and forgiveness that helped her find the healing she so desperately needed.

Molly has written more about her sister Anne and the powerful way Anne influenced her life in a memoir titled *Secret Girl*. Many reviewers say it is a loving tribute to a beatific life, as it helped Molly see and understand what it means to be blessed.

Blessings or the beatific life is what today's Gospel is all about. Perhaps you are familiar with what are called "the beatitudes" of Jesus, which we just heard, the lines that begin, "blessed are those..." They are a central part of the Gospels, although most people are more familiar with the version from Matthew's Gospel than the ones we just heard from Luke. The two versions have things in common and differences and there are lots of sermons and commentaries that address those similarities and differences, so I am not going to give you a comparative sermon today. Instead, I believe it is worthwhile to consider what about this portion of the Gospel is so important to our faith as followers of Jesus and to ask what the author of the Gospel might be trying to show us.

Many scholars and commentators tell us this is one of those moments when Jesus gave a sermon that overturned the cultural and religious norms of the day by redefining what it means to be blessed.

More than one commentator has given a bit of a history lesson of the evolution of the term blessed. It is believed that to the ancient Greeks, the only beings who were considered blessed were the gods because they were the only beings that experienced a sense of happiness and contentment and were literally above and beyond the cares of the human beings laboring and suffering upon the earth. Later the term grew to include those who had died, as they were believed to be in the same place as the gods and were now freed from the cares and burdens of life and were finally happy and content. The term blessed further evolved for the Greeks to eventually include the wealthy and the elite whose money, class, and power put them above and beyond the cares and concerns of

the lower classes of people. For the Greeks, it seemed being blessed meant being above and beyond the cares and concerns of ordinary life.

In many places in the Old Testament, being blessed referred to trusting in God, as we saw in our first reading this morning. Being blessed further meant showing trust in God by living a righteous life, and it was believed that such a righteous life would be evidenced with lots of good stuff: a good wife, many children, many possessions.

All these definitions would suggest that Molly Bruce Jacobs was blessed before she met her sister Anne. But that is not the truth. The truth is Molly was not above nor beyond the cares and concerns of the world. The truth is she was suffering, and her life lacked joy. She was living the woes part of today's Gospel.

That is what Jesus was saying in his sermon on the beatitudes. Jesus was saying that being blessed was not about your stuff, it was not about your place in society. Being blessed is about how you live your life in a way that creates a life that does not attempt to escape from the hard or painful parts of life that does not see life as one circumstance after another that we are powerless to do anything about. Instead, the blessed or beatific life is one that can accept and embrace all that life throws at us, the good the bad the terrible the amazing the challenging the unexpected and finds a way to experience God with us in the middle of it all. A beatific life is a life centered around, nourished by, and radiates the Love of God to all people.

It is not a dream of the future, it is a reality of the present informed and transformed by the holy in its midst. And that can be terrifying to some people. Because it does fly in the face of what was known and understood and believed and accepted by intellectual and powerful minds in the past and some folks today. There may be a reason in Luke's Gospel Jesus spoke about the beatitudes on a plain instead of a mountain, because instead of having visible hierarchies of higher and lower levels, in today's Gospel everyone, the twelve disciples, or the larger group of disciples, or the many other people who were listening to Jesus that day, everyone was on the same visual level. Jesus had leveled the playing field, as it were, with his proclamation of what it truly means to be blessed.

And that can frighten people so much that they dismiss the beatitudes as being idealistic or impractical. But then there are people like Anne Jacobs whose beatific life flies in the face of such a dismissal. Unlike her sister Molly, Anne did not graduate from a prestigious university. She did not have an impressive

career, never married, and never had children; she never had any of the things society says she needs to be happy, to be carefree, to be blessed. Instead, Anne lived her entire life in an institution and struggled with her health and her disabilities. Yet Anne did have a joy about her that so deeply influenced her hurting sister it is what Molly believes gave her the healing she needed. Anne gave her permission to see there was more to life and more to do with her life than she had known about or believed before. Anne showed Molly that all people have something to contribute to the world, some, like Anne, can bring healing, joy, and hope, all the stuff of the love of God.

In his sermon on the beatitudes, Jesus might have been saying that understanding what it truly means to be blessed might lead to more of the healing that the crowds came to him for in today's Gospel, and that such healing from God can come not only from Christ himself, but from the life lived in God's love, the way Christ gives us through his death, resurrection and ascension.

That's why the beatitudes matter to those of us who follow Jesus today. They can help us recognize the value and dignity of all people. And they can help us not only imagine but help create a world where the love of God is the way in every and all aspects of life. The beatitudes show us that beatific or blessed life is not for a few elites who are above it all, God's blessing is for all of us, to receive and to live into so that all the world may know the healing and joy of God's love.