

In today's gospel Jesus shares The Beatitudes, a teaching that forms the foundation of Christian living. Our Catechism contains a section called, "Our Vocation to Beatitude," and helps us navigate to the desire for happiness. It says, "This desire is of divine origin: God has placed it in the human heart in order to draw man to the One who alone can fulfill it." In this section Thomas Aquinas says, "God alone satisfies." The Beatitudes guide us to our common goal of finding happiness and satisfaction in life.

So, Let's look at an atypical man on a typical journey through life, seeking happiness and satisfaction. His name is Leo Tolstoy, one of the greatest writers of all time. He lived in Russia during the 1800s and in his book, "A Confession," he writes about a period of his life, when he lived as an atheist and found himself in crisis. He says, "I had a beloved wife, fine children, and a large estate. More than ever before I was respected by friends and acquaintances and praised by strangers. Physically, I could keep up with the peasants working in the fields; and mentally, I could work eight and ten hours at a stretch without suffering any aftereffects." He had everything, yet was experiencing a profound moral crisis. He said, "I could not attach a rational meaning to a single act in my entire life." He was hopeless and constantly fighting off the urge to take his own life.

He looked for an answer to the question, "Why should I live?" He asked the most esteemed leaders in every branch of science, yet he found no answers. They said, "We cannot tell you what you are and why you live; we do not have the answers to these questions, and we are not concerned with them."

He asked his colleagues from the upper class of Russia, but they also failed him. He says, "I saw only: 1) people who did not understand the problem, 2) people who understood it but drowned in their intoxication with life, 3) people who understood it and put an end to life, and 4) people who understood it but in weakness continued to live a life of despair." We can think of these as categories of the people seeking the wisdom of Jesus on the mountain that day.

Finally, after suffering for a long time, Tolstoy turned to the lower class of people in his community. He said, "I began to grow closer to the believers from among the poor, the simple, the uneducated folk, from among the pilgrims, the monks, and the peasants." They were Christian and he began to adopt their beliefs. As Jesus says in today's gospel, "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours."

Tolstoy said, "I realized that no matter how irrational and unattractive the answers given by faith, they have the advantage of bringing to every reply, a relationship between the finite and the infinite, without which there can be NO reply." The finite refers to EARTHLY life and the limited knowledge we have about it. The infinite refers to God and the endless life beyond this world. It's the poor who taught Tolstoy to rely on God, rather than science to answer the question of the meaning of life. Tolstoy goes on to say, "However I may put the question of how I am to live, the answer is: according to the law of God."

He asked the question, "What meaning is there which is not destroyed by death?" And the answer he found was, "Union with the infinite God, paradise." Just as the Beatitudes say, "Blessed are you who are poor the KINGDOM OF GOD (the union with God) is yours."

How can we learn from Tolstoy and live the Beatitudes? Do we have to sell everything we own and give it to the poor? That's certainly one way, but we can also change the way we view our material lives. We can practice detachment from the finite things of this world and attach ourselves to our infinite God.

Living the Beatitudes begins with detaching ourselves from our possessions, our egos, and our addictions in life. For example, let's consider how taking a walk helps with detachment. Walking detaches us from the shelter of our home and as we put ourselves into nature and the presence of God. In walking with others, we attach ourselves to them in love, share some "Carefree Timelessness" as Matthew Kelly calls it. Walking is a healthy commitment, if we walk one mile away from our home, we're committed to two miles of exercise, unless of course, we decide to call an Uber.

Detachment is also about avoiding unhealthy commitments. For example, when we start watching a video on our phones, we might feel compelled to finish the video, in this case we get "attached" rather than "detached." We'll stay away from the black hole of doom scrolling.

Sharing is another form of detachment. When we share our time, treasure, and talent we detach ourselves from what we have and give it to someone else. Married couples commit to sharing their entire lives with each other. When children come along, a couple detaches from much of their free time and shares it with God's creation, their kids.

Fasting is another habit of detachment that brings us closer to God. Jesus says, Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied. Fasting doesn't always have to involve food. We can fast in our conversations by speaking less and listening more. This can boost satisfaction in our relationships and develop our virtue of humility.

Finally, prayer is a way to detach from our busy lives and take time to ask God to help those in need. Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh." When we pray for those in need, we internalize their pain and can laugh and truly celebrate with them when God restores them through his blessing.

Let me finish with a quote from Leo Tolstoy on seeking happiness through faith. "Among those who have understood the meaning of life, who know how to live and die, I saw not two or three or ten but hundreds, thousands, and millions. And all of them, infinitely varied in their customs, intellects, educations, and positions and in complete contrast to my ignorance, knew the meaning of life and death, labored in peace, endured suffering and hardship, lived and died, and saw in this not vanity but good." God alone satisfies. We ask for His help to guide our lives in faith and lead us to Him through His son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.