

The Henri Nouwen Society
From Fear to Love:
Spiritual Grounding in Anxious Times
Video Meditations featuring Marjorie J. Thompson

Episode Three: Releasing Control, Embracing Humility

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Well, hello and welcome back to our third meditation, titled *Releasing Control, Embracing Humility*. And I'd like to begin with a poem from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*:

We must not portray you in king's robes,
You drifting mist that brought forth the morning.
Once again, from the old paint boxes, we take the same gold for scepter and crown
That has disguised you through the ages.
Piously, we produce our images of you,
Till they stand around you like a thousand walls.
And when our hearts would simply open,
Our fervent hands hide you.

Last week, we explored the meaning of our shadow side, and looked at healthy self-examination and entered a practice of self-compassion. Shedding light on our shadows and extending compassion toward all that we find in our hearts - light and dark - puts us in a posture of humility. And today, I want to offer some thoughts on God's loving humility and how it can shape our own. The blessings of humble love are described by Jesus in the Beatitudes. And about 20 years ago, I wrote a book on the Beatitudes called *The Way of Blessedness*, for the Companions in Christ series. I'm going to draw a bit on that book today, and if you're interested in exploring further the riches of these teachings, you might want to read that book. I commend it to you.

But to start, let me address the images of God in Rilke's beautiful love poem. Our portrayals of divine majesty in kingly robes and golden crown end up, in Rilke's view, disguising the reality of God's being. "Our images stand around you like a thousand walls," he says, "our fervent hands" hiding this "drifting mist that [brings] forth the morning," which is a poetic expression, I think, of the Spirit that breathes over the face of the waters in Creation. The poet invites us to imagine our hearts simply opening to the beauty of creative grace in motion.

But the idea of God as king has dominated human imagination for millennia. It permeates both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, although Jesus's life and death turn our kingship images on their heads. I would suggest that conventional notions of God as all-powerful come with a price - and that price is fear. The Bible speaks of God as Lord; in Latin, the word is *domini*. God's *dominion* rules heaven and earth. But we tend to equate dominion with domination, maybe even with domineering power, and many Bible passages reinforce those word associations. So, the image of dominating divine power is embedded very deep in our consciousness.

Embedded with it, inevitably, is fear. And I don't mean "wondering awe," as in the likely meaning of "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," that phrase we find in some of the Psalms and Proverbs. I mean craven fear, because in human experience, anyone who is all-powerful can easily take away personal freedom and whatever limited sense of control we may have over our own lives.

Throughout much of history, kings and emperors were the instruments of such power, instilling both awe and fear in their subjects. And such rulers were very naturally models for human ideas about divine power. An omnipotent being who controls the untameable terrors of earth and sea and sky can surely choose to do with mere mortals whatever he pleases. We have long suffered under the weight of a fear-based image of God. Just the idea of unlimited divine power inspires awe and instills fear in the human psyche. Add to that a theology of hell, where God casts unrepentant sinners to burn eternally. Now, any God who in the name of divine justice promises to punish a creature with unending torture is a being who elicits fear above all else. We have created a theology in which fear of punishment underlies whatever language of mercy and love we may layer over it. So, if we proclaim the love of God, but condition it with what we must believe or say or do to merit that love, we imply that divine wrath is more fundamental than divine goodness. No wonder ideas of God as king lean toward the domineering face of dominion.

Christians hold a very precious remedy for this fearful image of God: the person of Jesus. If we believe that Jesus reveals the true nature of God, then what he shows is a quite different and deeply paradoxical picture of divine power. So, the mighty Word through whom all things are created becomes a tiny stranger in a manger. The One who comes as rightful ruler to his own people is not recognized or accepted by them. Jesus, as Lord and Master, takes the menial role of washing his disciples' feet. The Wisdom of Heaven comes to human beings under the guise of foolishness and weakness. The supreme power of the universe gives up all evidence of power, suffering a cruel death on a Roman instrument of torture. Paul sums up this incredible paradox in the Christ hymn of Philippians 2: "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to exploit, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness; and being found in human

form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

What a shocking vision of divine humility! What a contrast to our image of God's dominating power! Henri Nouwen notes how unexpected the gospel portrayal is of God's powerlessness in Jesus, and how it disarms our fear. He writes:

By becoming a vulnerable child, completely dependent on human care, God wants to take away all distance between the human and the divine. Who can be afraid of a little child who needs to be fed, to be cared for, to be taught and guided? We usually talk about God as the all-powerful, all mighty God on whom we depend completely, but God wanted to become the all powerless, all vulnerable. God, who completely depends on us. How can we be afraid of a God who wants to be "God-with-us" and wants us to become "us-with-God"?

For Christians, Jesus is Lord, but he is the Domini who does not dominate; rather, who demonstrates divine Lordship, which is servant Lordship. Jesus reveals the dominion of God as the reign of love, tender care for the lost and loving challenge to the proud.

Of course, to human minds, deformed by power as subjugation, intimidation, and control, it is a weak-seeming dominion. But to minds re-formed by the spirit of Christ, it is the very strength and wisdom of God. Martin Luther King, Jr. describes the paradox of power and love in a way that helps us reframe our worldly perspective. He was addressing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, when he said:

Now power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. . . And one of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites. . . so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. We've got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.

Well, human love can be sentimental and anemic, but divine love is neither. Paul proclaims, "God's weakness is stronger than human strength." In Dostoevsky's classic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the wisdom figure, Father Zosima, urges his spiritual son never to underestimate the power of humble love. This is the weakness of God greater than human strength. It is the hidden power of Jesus on the cross absorbing and forgiving every power hostile to love.

Divine love operates not by coercion, but by invitation, persuasion, beguilement. It holds the attraction of goodness and beauty, the draw of authenticity and truth. So, while coercion repels us, love attracts us. And this is exactly how love overcomes evil without ever using evil means. And what could be more powerful than this?

Jesus reveals that divine power is not really all-power, as we imagine. And most especially, not the force of domineering control. Rather, it is power constituted by its divine nature, which is love. Through the powerful energies of love, which we call the Spirit, human beings are inspired and empowered to become more like God. The vitality of this power is revealed in our lives, wherever it triumphs over hatred, fear, retribution, greed, apathy, abuse. Love is the only power great enough to transform the human heart. Participating in this kind of strength truthfully reflects the divine image within us. If the force of divine love comes to us by kind and gentle means, transfiguring hearts and minds then, instead of fear, it inspires joy. Embracing this love calls us to let go our small ideas of self - our ego, illusions and the identities that they so carefully craft.

The self-emptying love of God invites us to relinquish our tightly held self-images, the external things we're so attached to, our ways of manipulating others to meet our needs. God seems to be beckoning us to release control and embrace humility. Can we not see that our little ego domains keep us chained to fear? The ego is always asking, "Am I good enough? Strong enough? Smart enough? Acceptable enough? Is anything that I ever achieve enough for what I imagine the world demands?"

Our small selves strive for praise and status, for wealth and power over others. And yet, these pursuits keep us locked in stressful competition for scarce resources in a zero-sum game. So, if you win, I lose. And if I win, you lose. What a recipe for anxiety!

Thankfully, there is a freer, more joyful way to live, and we see it in Jesus. According to Henri Nouwen, Jesus paints a self-portrait in words; we call it the Beatitudes. It pictures the profound blessing and joy discovered in a life of vulnerable love. Each beatitude embraces a release of the fearful ego. Each describes some form of self-emptying that makes room for greater freedom and joy.

In these wisdom sayings, it seems Jesus gives us eight ways to grow toward the beauty of his own soul, moving us from fear to love, from anxiety to peace. So, in the next segment, I want to talk about the Beatitudes, what it means to live into these spiritual paradoxes. I want to lift up the self-emptying aspect of each Beatitude and the way each one draws us beyond our fearful ego and frees us to join the blessing of Jesus's humble love.

In Greek, the word for blessed is *makarios*, which means sharing in the life of God. Blessing is sharing in the life of God. The ultimate joy of belonging to God's life comes from participating in God's self-giving love, being part of that flow.

So, first: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This blessing is the root of all that follows. Poverty, of course, is an experience of insufficiency and lack. From the ego's perspective, all forms of poverty are to be avoided. We're afraid to be without anything we think we need to live the kind of life we want to live. And yet, as it has been said, there is a God-shaped void in every human being that only God can fill. We are not self-made; our true identity resides only in God. So, physically and emotionally in this world, our lives feel insecure. And so they are, from the ego's perspective.

But Jesus is teaching us a spiritual perspective. Poverty, in its spiritual sense, points to our utter dependence on God for life itself and for every grace within life. By embracing the truth of this poverty, we create space in our hearts for the abundant gifts God delights to pour into us. The reign of God – the rule or realm of God, what we sometimes call the kingdom – the reign of God becomes a reality in our hearts when we are free enough, empty enough to receive it. There is no greater security than belonging fully to God. And to know this with our whole being is to be relieved of fear, secure in the realm of divine love, whether in this life or the life to come.

Thomas Merton gives us a mystical picture of the gift of spiritual poverty. You have a handout called *In Support of Contemplative Prayer*, and I'm going to read now one of the quotes on that. In the middle of the page, Merton says:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God written in us. . . It is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody. . . The gate of heaven is everywhere.

Let's go on to the second Beatitude: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Sorrow and grief are inevitable in the human condition. Losses come in all shapes. The death of loved ones, lost marriages, friendships, communities, lost dreams, hopes, beliefs, lost careers, physical health, mental capabilities. Mourning is an experience of intense emptiness and pain. In this decade of my 60s, I have suffered two great losses within five years: my husband and my brother. It seems that a part of who we are dies with every

significant loss, and the lonely, aching abyss left in our heart is a space only something beyond us can adequately fill.

The limited ego-identity does not have resources adequate to this predicament. Only a love that transcends our deepest fears will fill the gap. So, as difficult as I know it is to do, if we can manage to keep our broken hearts open as we grieve, and not shut ourselves down, it does become possible to know, through the intensity of grief, that even greater immensity of God's love that bears pain with us. Divine love flows to us most often through the compassionate care of others, but can also be known to us profoundly in prayer. I will say more about contemplative prayer connected with another one of the Beatitudes, but contemplative prayer is one of the practices that allows us to know God's presence with us in bearing our pain.

"Blessed are the meek for, they will inherit the earth": the third Beatitude. Many mistake meekness for weakness, which is a profound misunderstanding. Only two people in all of the Bible are described as meek: Moses and Jesus. Neither giant of scripture could be considered a doormat. Jesus describes himself this way in Matthew's gospel. He says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for, I am meek and lowly in heart."

The Greek for meek means "gentle strength": another paradox. When we hear those words separately, we tend to see them as opposites, yet if we hear them together, we really know exactly what it means, because we've seen gentle strength in a person or two. Meekness is human strength under divine direction. We all have powers: intelligence, skill, energy, creativity, speech. The question is: How do we use our powers, and for what purpose? That's always the question about power. And if we ask that question of God, Jesus shows us this answer: God uses the power of love for the purpose of redemption and transformed life. When we participate in God's life, our powers are used in the same service. In taking on the yoke of Christ, we release our ego-centered will, joining Jesus, whose will is aligned with divine intention. Remember, our small desires keep us locked into anxious agendas as we try to control life from our limited viewpoints. Self-will is hard and brittle, rooted in fear of what we will lose if we don't hold the reins tightly. Jesus is inviting us to enter his deeper trust, to loosen our ego-driven grip and become available to God's good and loving vision for our lives.

To grow in gentle strength, I commend the practice of contemplative prayer, which Richard Rohr describes this way (and again, you have this on a handout). "Contemplative prayer," he says:

Is a practice of self-emptying. At its most basic, contemplative prayer is a letting go - of habitual thoughts, preferences, judgements, and feelings. Though life itself is often our most powerful teacher through great love and suffering, contemplation is a daily,

small death to false self and ego. It makes space for True Self to appear, to rise from the ashes of our partial and protected self.

Isn't that a lovely, gentle phrase: "our partial and protected self," where most of us live out our lives.

On the other page of this handout is a description of centering prayer, with which some of you may be familiar. Centering prayer helps us to detach from the normal content of waking consciousness, whether that be thoughts or feelings, memories, even physical sensations. The practice gradually shifts us from our daily ego-consciousness to a place of interior surrender and openness, where we are available to the hidden work of the Spirit in us. Contemplative prayer slowly reorders our lives from anxious effort to a posture of receiving God's love and allowing ourselves to be transformed by it. It allows us to become meek alongside Jesus in that yoking.

The fourth Beatitude: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Hunger and thirst describe intense experiences of emptiness and need. Jesus knew physical hunger and thirst, as did the crowds he preached to; it was not so uncommon in that time. And drawing from their shared experience, Jesus speaks of spiritual craving, hunger and thirst for righteousness. Righteousness in the Bible means right relationships with God and fellow human beings. It combines love and justice. Right relationships express kind and dignified regard for one another. Understanding, respect for differences, equal and fair treatment, affirmation for growth, delight in one another's giftedness.

We all yearn for healthy, fulfilling relationships like this in all of our circles of connection. And when we do not experience just and loving relationships with those nearest to us, our spirits easily sink into depression, self-rejection - even despair. Our craving for good relationships may be even stronger than our desire for food or drink. Human beings are made for love. We need it to survive and to thrive. And we expend so much anxious energy over troubled relationships, don't we? And we suffer from fear of losing our most precious connections.

Jesus knows these deep needs. He speaks to lift our anxiety. Our thirst for right relationships will bring fulfillment, he promises. God's love and justice will finally prevail. And by the grace of the Spirit, we also do what is in our power to do, to live rightly here and now. As Gandhi put it, "Be the change you want to see."

The fifth Beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." And here is one we will speak of more in our next session on forgiveness. Mercy is such a healing word. I am always grateful to be on the receiving end of it. But Jesus seems to imply here that mercy is reciprocal. And my ego wants to pull me the other direction of that reciprocity. So, what do I

need to let go of, to be free enough to extend mercy, to be on the giving side? Maybe my conviction of being right or justified or owed. Maybe my wounded pride or my resentment. Maybe that chip on my shoulder I've been carrying around for years. Being merciful requires us to be emptied of self-righteous judgements. And as I've already confessed, all it takes is a news report for my mind to churn with condemnation.

The poverty of mercy lies in identifying with the brokenness of others, rather than imagining ourselves morally superior, even in relation to certain political figures or church leaders or that impossible person I have to work with or live with - which may even be myself. In Luke's gospel, Jesus says: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you . . . and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Can we genuinely empathize with the fears and weaknesses and sufferings of others, understanding their need for mercy? Because we stand under the same judgment and receive the same mercy from the same God. We, too, are weak. Governed by fear. Living from our partial, protected self. When Jesus refers to that log obstructing our vision, I don't think he means the comparative size of our sin, but the enormous obstacle created by our lack of humility and love. The moment, the *moment* we refuse mercy to others, we block ourselves from receiving what God would freely give us. But the reverse is also true: In the very act of extending mercy to fellow strugglers, the floodgates of divine mercy are opened for us. Mercy is key to living faithfully with one another in these dark and anxious days.

Beatitude six: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." To be pure in heart is to empty its clutter, so much of which is devoted to ego preservation. Things like deceit, malice, envy, sarcasm, shallow attachments, destructive cravings. Just as water needs to be cleansed of impurities to be healthy, so with the heart. When detritus is sifted out, cloudiness disappears. Matters that distract our attention from God fade, and the eyes of the heart begin to see clearly. As our focus goes to what matters most, God becomes visible everywhere. We see divine love and presence in all of life when the heart is clear. Henri Nouwen puts it this way: "Contemplation is participating in the divine self-recognition. The divine Spirit alive in us makes our world transparent for us and opens our eyes to the presence of divine Spirit in all that surrounds us. It is with our heart of hearts that we see the heart of the world."

Surely a heart that can see divine presence everywhere is a heart free from fear, a heart wide-open to the reality of God's love in all times and places.

Beatitude number seven: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." When we are at peace within ourselves, peace flows to those around us, whether we know it or not. And yet daily life so often brings us to an inner state of conflict and anxiety. The many divisions and oppositions that we have already named hook our attention. They draw us

into their fearful, angry, coercive orbit. To find inner peace requires relinquishment of those kinds of things. What do we need to surrender, to detach from, in order to find the deep gift of peace that enables us to radiate that spirit of peace to others? Personally, I can name a few things. I need to let go of my ego-based turf wars, even when these wars are conducted only in my imagination. And I have to remember how many one-way “conversations” I have had in my head with imagined adversaries. Maybe you know what I mean? I am called to surrender desire for retaliation against those who have hurt or offended me, to relinquish revenge in any form against those I consider my enemies. I need to release my agenda while I’m listening to others. Something very simple. (I will speak more of this in another session.)

Becoming a peacemaker means, also, continuing to notice my shadows, so that I can refrain from projecting them onto others. My small self sweeps me into the drama of pain and fear and conflict and opposition. It keeps me imprisoned in a limiting perception of separation from others who, if I’m separate from them, I may then see them as unworthy of my love or care or respect. When I let go this sense of separation and embrace the truth of my unity with others in the vastness of God’s love, something very beautiful happens. The peace of Christ that passes understanding takes hold in my spirit. The felt need for opposition evaporates. We may truly be called children of God, as we recognize all people as God’s children alongside us. And what a restful, peaceful state of mind that is!

Finally: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” To me, I will say this is most challenging of the Beatitudes. It invites full participation in the utter poverty and humiliation of Christ. I have not known or sought this blessing, but the words suggest how strong humility and love must be to serve as a lightning rod for others to absorb their fear and hatred and rejection and, often, their violence. To suffer persecution with equanimity requires us to surrender both inflated self-importance and deflated self-negation, twin sides of the coin of false self. Let’s remember the idea of humility as a level ground.

This Beatitude requires authentic self-respect and immense trust in God. We must know who and whose we are, and to be free, not only from the impulse to retaliate, but even from the need to protect ourselves. This final blessing invites us to identify so deeply with the self-emptying of Christ that we simply stand undefended and unafraid in God’s truth. We may be unjustly blamed, maligned, or taken advantage of, and yet we can remain calm and committed. Such a stance can only be freely chosen, and only when it is entirely moved by the love of God. We cannot fake it or coerce ourselves into it by good intentions. Freely accepted persecution comes by a grace beyond us.

And with it comes the privilege of participating in God’s loving reign, that dominion that does not dominate. The willingness to suffer for the sake of goodness is the highest expression of vulnerable love on earth. It is both the character of divine humility and a full-hearted

expression of divine power. Jesus was pleased to share, *to share* spiritual power with his disciples, and with the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the risen Christ confers this power on all who would follow him in the path of self-sacrificing love. The Beatitudes show us the shape of a life released from fear and drawn into love - the humble, gentle yet powerfully transforming love of God.

And when I am painfully conscious of the dark times we are facing, I like to imagine the very roots of my being sinking down into the dark, rich soil of Christ's love, from which I may draw up the nutrients I need for this moment, the spiritual nutrients. I let myself receive personally Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in Ephesians 3, that Christ may dwell in my heart through faith, as I am being rooted and grounded in love. That I might comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ surpassing all knowledge, so that I may be filled with all the fullness of God.

This is a prayer for the ages, a prayer that speaks profoundly to each and all of us. I commend it to you and I recommend simply soaking in it.

Thank you for your patient listening today. I look forward to our next time together.