Among some of the oldest trees on earth are Yew trees, with some approaching 4-5 thousand years of age. Incredibly, the yew branches are able to droop low to the ground over time, take root, and regenerate into a new iteration of that tree. For this miracle they've been planted near cemeteries and regarded as sacred symbols of death and rebirth for many centuries. Paradoxically, it is by allowing ourselves to be diminished, to be broken down, and yes, to die, that new life can take root within us.

This paradox of allowing something to diminish or die so that new life can take root, we hear it play out in our Gospel's countercultural depiction of what we ought to value and strive for– what we need to be 'bless-ed:' Blessed are the gentle and meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, for they shall inherit the Earth, be satisfied, see God, find peace, and be called children of God. These fruits are all one singular realization: Something has happened, and nothing can ever be the same.

How utterly unlike the reality of our contemporary society this all is! The haughty, the self-interested, self-righteous, aggressive, vengeful, and arrogant are those who most often find power and influence it seems. These virtues most certainly are not the virtues we often see lionized, and they aren't ones frequently nurtured and rewarded; they are what I call virtues of "vulnerability" and are often associated by those in power as qualities of the "losers." Who wants to be poor, meek, mournful, and persecuted?

Truthfully, when I was younger I used to do something of a "Beatitude Audit" for myself whenever this reading would come up in Mass. I would oscillate wildly in the wake of my audit between an ironic holier-than-thou smugness and–upon a harsher and more 'honest' assessment–a devastating self-loathing. Am I "good" and "virtuous," or simply a fraud posing as such? And "if they only knew what I knew they wouldn't be so complimentary of me." Sounds very middle school, doesn't it? And so of course for the past decade I have found myself working in a middle school, working with

students through this same dynamic, and trying to reflect back to them any potential discrepancies between how they experience themselves and how they are experienced by others. See, everyone is the protagonist of their own story. Those in power in our society likely believe their actions to be justified, their choices righteous, their views right and sound. And yet, **gestures wildly.** Here we are.

And so fully embracing these beatific virtues of vulnerability is so challenging. I was reflecting recently on a memory from my early grade school days that may illuminate some of these challenges. I was in the first grade or so, at a new school, and after getting my lunch tray one day I remember walking down the long line of cafeteria tables. At each open spot I would walk up and try to sit down, and another student would quickly sit down in that space, so I'd move on to the next open spot, and someone else would slide their tray into that space as well, or say that someone else was sitting there, or they were saving it for someone, or simply a "you can't sit here, go sit somewhere else." I found my way, meekly, to this little school desk next to the milk station in the corner of the large cafeteria space, trying desperately to center my gaze away from the leering glances and smirks. My vulnerability was on full blast. Mercifully, lunch came to a close and it was recess time. I distinctly remember walking out the side door connecting the cafeteria to the playground and being hit in the eyes with a blaze of sunlight. Temporarily blinded, I wandered a few steps forward, blinking out the tears and trying to orient myself, when one of the kids who had turned me away shouted out "aww Daydid, are you cwying?!" He laughed and ran off.

I began searching for my brother. He saw me from across the playground, came over, and gave me a big hug. I don't even think he said anything, he just came over, hugged me, and then went back off to play. "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted."

The vulnerability came naturally to me as a kid, I had no choice. But seeing and embracing the virtue in it was much harder. Especially being a twin, which can feel inherently rivalrous and always made me feel like I had to be in competition with others. “Who is the smart twin? The funny twin? The cute twin?” and so on. But in this moment, all that competing for friendships and trying to one-up each other fell away, and what was left was our intertwined selves, embracing. James Alison writes that Jesus made it possible for us to begin to live without competition and sacrifice…to begin to live as if death were not, and therefore for us not to have to protect ourselves over against it by making sure we tread on other people,” (Undergoing God, 60). “For [we] are the Ones who have survived the time of great distress; [we] have washed our robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb.”

In some ways, I feel like this moment in the cafeteria, and others like it, are the spots where the tree of the person you see before you first took root. Because I remember as a kid agonizing over this moment. I felt so weak, so small, so in need of others. What was it about me that they didn’t like? What did it say about me? About them? We often find ourselves caught in this need to find a scapegoat, to hang someone out for sacrifice so that we may feel free of ridicule, safe from rejection. And in response, I felt a temptation to feed my hurt into resentment, to get caught up in rivalry and demonize those who wronged me and to try to “get them back” in some way; I even felt a temptation to play up the victimhood and play the martyr. And again I would oscillate, from feeling like they had it coming to feeling like I was awful for even having that thought.

But somewhere along the way I have come to realize that the Beatitudes are far less about “who I am” and far more about “who I am in relationship with those around me.” That “in need of others” feeling helped draw me to find my brother, and it strengthened that relationship in that moment. The beatitudes are inherently relational. And they ask us: what do I recognize, affirm, and nurture

in you, and what do you reflect back to me? We are constantly co-creating one another, and in that creative process we are responding to God's call. "What you did to them, you did to Me." What needs to droop low and die in us, so that new life can take root?

Jesus' great gift to us was allowing us to break free from the sacrificial and scapegoat society, to enter into a new cycle, from you to me, from me to we, from death to rebirth and new life. We look around at our world and we witness exploitation, we see profit-driven war-mongering and ego-driven violence, we have great reason to mourn. Alison continues: "We can imagine retaliation, we can imagine protection; but we find it awfully difficult to imagine someone we despised, and were awfully glad not to be like–whom we would rather cast out so as to keep ourselves going–we find it awfully difficult to imagine that person generously irrupting into our midst so as to set us free to enable something quite new to open up for us," (Undergoing God, 67).

And this "something quite new" has already taken root and opened up for us and is already accessible now. We are called to co-create this "heaven-on-earth" through our ways of moving through the world, through our actions, our protesting and speaking out, our voting. When we are able to get out of our own obsession with being "good" or "right," being "blessed" and "saintly," we are able to better recognize and experience the blessedness in those around us. I've heard the saints described–like stained glass–as those who "let the light shine through. We are being asked to recognize the light in those around us–even in those who wound us–and to use that recognition to propel us towards the deeply-known truth of our Oneness. As Lisa Kelly writes, "'Blessed is this one and that one, and him, and her, [and them]…' If I can begin by seeing each individual with the title of 'bless-ed,' I find myself blessed just to be in the crowd among them."

We are sacred and interconnected trees in the woods of God's garden, simply growing and drooping and growing again together, offering shade, and a soft place to rest. ~ David Gaillardetz