

During seminary, I spent a summer working in Uganda with my friend, Augustine Salimo.

At the time, Augustine was an archdeacon in-charge of about 40 churches and schools.

He took me around to these churches and schools so I could speak to people.

We followed the same pattern everywhere we went –

Augustine would introduce me, and offer to translate my English into either Swahili or the local dialect.

I would always start out by talking about America, our churches, and our faith.

At one high school, the headmaster assembled the kids on the side of the grassy hill – just like Jesus assembled the crowd for the Sermon on the Mount –

Augustine and I stood above the kids, so they could see us. In their uniforms, the 300 kids looked like a sea of navy and white.

The headmaster introduced the Augustine Salimo properly, as the Venerable - and Augustine introduced me.

These is my friend and col-league, rRob Gies-el-mann.

I started into my schpiel: the United States is a very large country.

Only these kids couldn't understand me.

After about a minute, they stopped me and asked Augustine to translate for them.

So he did.

I began again, The United States is a very large country, which Augustine translated into Swahili.

But after another minute, they stopped Augustine again, and said, No. Into English.

They wanted him to translate what I was saying into English.

You see, it wasn't that they couldn't understand English – they couldn't understand my English!

So Augustine did... The United States is a very large country, I would say, and Augustine would translate: Thee United States ees a verry lage countree

All kidding aside, I was truly honored to serve in Uganda – Ugandans are called, the friendly people, and for good reason.

I learned many lessons through them, including this: people of goodwill are the same everywhere.

Yes. The people I met were poor, certainly by our standards.

They didn't have money, or cars, or good healthcare.

They were cash-poor; but they were also hope-rich.

They believe in a future: for themselves and their kids.

That some day, they will own two acres, and not just one.

That their children will have better lives than they do, through education and hard work.

So yes, these people are poor, but they are also hope-rich.

In the prophet Micah's time, this was called, anawim – the person who is poor, yet hopeful. Anawim.

The prophets viewed the anawim as closer to God than the rest of us, simply because they do not rely on wealth or the security they have built-up around themselves.

They have to rely upon God.

The New Testament offers several examples of anawim –

Jesus' mother, Mary, John the Baptist's mother Elizabeth, Simeon the prophet, all shown by Scripture to be lowly, yet waiting patiently for the Lord.

Each was poor, but tasted hope in a special way.

This is the person of-whom Jesus speaks when he speaks of the poor in spirit: they are happy.

For it is the anawim who see God.

Matthew records the Beatitudes as Jesus' inaugural sermon.

Most likely, the Beatitudes and the entire Sermon on the Mount are a collection of Jesus' teachings delivered over the course of his life.

Whichever is the case, the Beatitudes are both descriptive and prescriptive.

They describe a state of being – that is truth, these people are happier.

They also compel the listener – you and me – to become happy, or blessed, through a type of poverty of spirit.

But let's be honest, who wants to be poor in spirit?

Who wants to mourn, or be meek?

Raise your hand if you woke up this morning, with a deep desire to suffer for righteousness' sake?

--You don't come to church to suffer, you come to alleviate your suffering.

You don't come to church to mourn, you come to ease your mourning.

We all believe church is about rising above it all, but here is Jesus, admonishing us to sink below it all.

St. John's Ross is battling its neighbors because it, like St. Stephen's a couple of years ago, wants to house the Marin homeless one night each week during Winter.

The homeless men would sleep in St. John's Parish Hall.

St. John's neighbors are divided; some are supportive, but others are not, and a few are very angry.

The angry neighbors complain that crime will rise, that their neighborhood will become dangerous.

Interestingly, one woman was far too honest:

The homeless men will destroy the illusion  
we have created for ourselves, here in Ross.

I think she means the illusion of security, of living a clean and ordered life that does not touch on pain or sickness or mental illness.

A bubble, the woman lives in a bubble, an artificial world without the dirt of life.

This woman is afraid. Many neighbors are afraid.

We're all afraid – so we look at someone else – a homeless person – and blame them for our dis-ease, our fear.

My guess is that this woman isn't afraid of the homeless person, she's deeply afraid of herself.

I remember shaking hands with a dirty homeless fellow, once, and wanting to go wash my hands.

What was I afraid of?

I'm not proud of that, but there it is.

Fear.

Fear can be a healthy response to a real threat – but just as often, fear is exaggerated, a response to a threat that doesn't exist.

Caricatures of threat, we become afraid of ghosts.

We've created this pristine world of Ross so we don't have to face the real one.

There is no real safety in Ross.

Raw and painful life happens at the dirt level in Ross just like it does on the streets of San Francisco, or in Belvedere.

But Jesus is promising a safe place – a place where one can at last be secure, a geography of hope and faith and connection.

That place is located not in the arrogance of fear or self-promotion, but in simple living, in simple existence, in simple reliance – upon the Lord God.

Most church people want to know anawim – that hope in poverty, yet most of us have such a hard time letting go.

And yet, the first step in every religious experience – and this is true across the religions, and across the brands of Christianity – is letting go.

The prophet Micah gets this – there are three things, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

All three require letting go. Anawim.