

“Who Is Really Blessed?”

Matthew 5:1-12

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, IL

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Many years ago, Deb and I were given the opportunity to join other pastors from across Indiana for a journey to the Holy Land. When we arrived in Jerusalem, walking the narrow streets and alleys of the Old City, it was a powerful experience, particularly the experience of seeing and standing upon the very same paving stones of the Courtyard where Jesus, bound and bleeding, once stood before Pontius Pilate on the morning of his crucifixion. Yet it was in Galilee that I experienced most strongly a sense of his living presence, as we visited Capernaum and its surrounding countryside, the places where Jesus taught and fed and healed the people.

One morning, traveling along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, we came upon a little church, exquisitely built in the shape of an octagon with each section of wall pierced by an open archway that afforded a spectacular view of the green hills of Galilee falling gently toward the sapphire waters of this inland, freshwater sea. Written above each of the arches were the words of Jesus' eight Beatitudes, his preface to the Sermon on the Mount, which brought a deep and very different meaning to the vistas those archways revealed, like a whispered blessing on those everlasting hills, painted as they were that day with palm trees, and bougainvillea, and the glittering blue expanse reaching all the way to the heights of Golan and the vastness of the desert beyond.

I took a moment to stand within each one of those archways, as if the words written above them were meant for me. Later, when I stepped out of that sanctuary into the bright sunlight and headed back to the bus, my spirit was at peace and my heart was brimming with joy. I hadn't quite realized the need I had

brought with me to the Church of the Beatitudes, as it is called—but I left that place with a present I will never forget.

I

The Beatitudes of Jesus are precisely that: gifts of God’s grace that demonstrate better than any other part of Scripture why the Gospel is, in fact, good news. Jesus’ statements are blessings: the blessing of the kingdom of heaven, blessings which come not after we’ve accomplished something virtuous, but simply because God chooses to bless us through the person of his Son. As author Skye Jethani puts it in his book, “What If Jesus Was Serious?”

“The beginning of the Sermon on the Mount is not a to-do list; it is a good news list. Jesus is describing who has the most to gain by the arrival of his kingdom. He is not prescribing what you must do to enter it.”

Does this describe you? New Testament scholar Dale Brunner in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew breaks the Beatitudes into two parts: the first four are the “Poor” Beatitudes, addressing those who are impoverished in spirit, empty of joy, powerless in society and starving for shalom... These blessings are blessings of grace and embraced by faith, because they offer not only hope for today, but the promise of a future—God’s future—where all these blessings will come to pass.

The second four Beatitudes are called the “Full” Beatitudes, because they bless those who seek to serve others with devotion and love. They include those “full of mercy,” those “pure in heart” (which Luther understood to mean people who embrace God’s will before their own), those “full of peace,” and yes, those “full of suffering,” too, because if we really set out to do these things, we will be at war with the religion of consumption, power and success which still commands the greatest following on earth. Jesus’ final blessing is reserved for the persecuted: those who suffer on account of their obedience to the teaching and example of Jesus himself. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven—not a future state, but a present condition which brings us back to where we began: to the First Beatitude, the one I want you to reflect on with me this morning.

II

When life as we knew it came to a crashing halt last March, most of us had to make big changes quickly in the ways we lived, worked and socialized. We thought it would all be over soon, even while millions of our fellow Americans lost their employment. Our hospitals were stretched to the limit, our first responders served bravely in harm's way, and the ability of our governing bodies were tested as never before. The fear of this pandemic affected our living in every way—particularly our spirits! But we rallied to the challenge. Then summer came, and with it a great hunger and thirst for normalcy. We were ready to declare a truce with the virus, have a picnic with friends and go to the beach, hoping all would be well! But all was not well, and now, as summer ends and school has started and Fall begins in earnest, people are tired. Spiritually tired, in a way that goes beyond even having to live through another national election. Yes—we all are somewhat “poor in spirit,” aren't we? Yet this pandemic has revealed like never before the people that Jesus may have originally meant when he said in Luke's Gospel, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God; blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled; blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” This virus with all its collateral effects has shown us our neighbors who live with food insecurity, who lack access to adequate medical care, who cannot practice social distancing because they are homeless, incarcerated, in detention or living in tenements. We here this morning may all share the relative state of being “poor in spirit” rather than “poor in fact,” yet whatever our outward condition, these blessings are calling us to look for God among the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, and to recognize his Son among them, just as those first crowds saw and heard him, there amidst those windswept hills of Galilee.

III

What is it to be “poor in spirit?” Very simply, it means to feel in your heart, and to know with your mind, that you are helpless without the help of God. The best illustration of this is found in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, found in Luke 18:

To be “poor in spirit” means to know our need for God, and to live accordingly, rejecting the false Gospel that teaches only the winners of this world have God’s blessing. It also means rejecting the false conclusion that the “rich in spirit” are blessed. We may think we may need to be rich in spirit in order to be virtuous, or obedient, or believing. We may think we will need great spiritual strength to obey Jesus’ commands about anger, or lust, or loving our enemies, or turning the other cheek.

But in fact the opposite is true. Only by approaching the Sermon on the Mount in a posture of humility can we understand Jesus’ true method and purpose, which is God’s method and purpose: GRACE PRECEDES OBEDIENCE. God’s blessings come before God’s commands, just as God delivered Israel from Egypt before delivering the Law on Mt. Sinai-which the Sermon on the Mount is clearly meant to evoke.

Conclusion

I don’t know about your story, but when I reflect on mine, I’ve come to see clearly that God has done his finest work in me when I’m acting more like that Tax Collector and less like that Pharisee. It’s when we boast to ourselves, “I’ve got this!” or when we have the tremendous problem of thinking we’ve got no problems at all that we fall out of the First Beatitude, and miss out on its free gift of grace. For the kingdom of heaven is found precisely where the poor are blessed and the brokenhearted are comforted; where the powerless have a future and the hungry are filled with good things; where mercy is cherished and peace is pursued; where God’s will is done not with perfection but with purity of desire, borne out of our need for God.

“Blessed are they,” indeed.

But these gifts aren’t just meant for tomorrow.

Your present is ready today. Are you ready to open it?

-Rev. Clinton G. Roberts