

**Learning to See as God Sees:  
Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit  
Matthew 5:3      Luke 18:9-14**

This summer we are reflecting on the Beatitudes: an invitation to see as Jesus sees... They are not to-do list, or a teaching on ethical behavior. They aren't entrance requirements for the Kingdom of heaven, or a way to achieve God's blessing. They are, rather, declarations by Jesus about the order of things in the Kingdom of heaven—and they are somewhat startling declarations! This is the world as God sees it; the upside-down Kingdom that Jesus came to reveal, and teach about. And we are invited to let God adjust our vision to see what God sees, and how God sees.

We're looking at the first beatitude this morning: *blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven*. And we just heard one illustration of this—a parable of Jesus from Luke's gospel to help us understand it.

Are you familiar with the word oxymoron, and what an oxymoron is? As a kid I used to think it was a special kind of moron—who acted like an ox. An ox-like moron; a stubborn moron. An oxymoron is a figure of speech, when two words are put together that have opposite or contradictory meanings. Like:

jumbo shrimp, or virtual reality. Working vacation. Instant classic. Or short sermon! In this morning's beatitude, we have what might appear to be an oxymoron, though I don't think Jesus intended it this way: "Blessed" and "poor" are two words you don't find in the same sentence. That could apply to most of the beatitudes!

Today when we think of someone as being blessed, we often think of a comfortable lifestyle, good health, happy family, a fulfilling job, and having material resources. However, Jesus said that those who are *poor in spirit* are blessed. Again, it's a reversal, it's upside-down and backwards.

The phrase "poor in spirit" means an inner emptiness and dependency. A recognition of an inner need—hence "empty" is not necessarily a bad thing, because it reveals a need that God wants to fill. The Greek word Matthew uses for "poor" literally means "the empty ones;" it can mean those who have nothing, materially—empty pockets and purses—but also empty in another way: empty in the sense that they have an inner need, an inner hunger. So, by using the phrase *poor in spirit*, Jesus is saying: You are blessed, because you have come to a place of knowing that you are in need, inwardly. You are in a place of being open to receiving what you truly need. The Kingdom! And all that comes with it: learning how to be in right relationship with God, with ourselves, and with others.

If we turn this around, we realize that the opposite of emptiness, or inner poverty, would be those who are already full, or rich in *self-sufficiency*. That's the big point Jesus is making in his little parable. One person is self-sufficient, one knows he is not. One is full of himself, one is empty—and is honest about his need.

As we dive into this, I'd like us to notice that Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit *because* they are poor in spirit." The poor in spirit are blessed, not **because** they are poor in spirit, but because the Kingdom of heaven is theirs. There is nothing particularly wonderful or meritorious about being poor in spirit. They are blessed because they know their need and they are open to receiving what God offers them—the Kingdom! Likewise, those who mourn are not blessed **because** they are grieving, but because God promises that they **will** be comforted. We'll talk about that next week. And so on, with all of the beatitudes.

So, for the first beatitude, the blessing is for those who are at the end of their rope. That's my paraphrase of this beatitude—blessed are those who are the end of their rope. This is like step 1 of the 12 steps of recovery: it's an admission of being in a place of powerlessness—whether it's a substance that we're powerless over, or someone else's behavior we can't control (and shouldn't try to!), or our own impulses or bad habits or unhelpful attitudes that we can't

seem to change by our own power. Fill in the blank. Step 1 says “Admitted that we were powerless over \_\_\_\_\_ and our lives had become unmanageable.” And I’m sure that all of us at some point in our lives have gotten to that point. To the end of our rope. Total need, looking for total help. And when we are there, Jesus says we are blessed because the Kingdom of heaven is ours. This abundant treasure of God’s kingdom and all that comes with it. If you want to continue to ponder this, take some time to do a study on what the Kingdom of heaven is. And know that this is for those who are empty, and who know their need.

As we look at this beatitude and the illustration that Jesus gives us, it reveals that being poor in spirit does not necessarily mean materially poor. That interpretation has been made over the years and it’s not quite accurate. It could be—many who are materially poor are indeed poor in spirit, but one doesn’t necessarily equal the other.

In Jesus’ parable we have a Pharisee and a tax collector. This is not an illustration of a person who is well off and another who is materially poor. Both of them are well off! Tax collectors were not poor people! In fact they were quite wealthy. They gained a fair amount of wealth from extortion, which is why they were so despised. So it’s more than a little shocking that Jesus uses a tax collector as the one who exhibits a good example of emptiness before God.

And after we hear both of their prayers at the sanctuary, Jesus says this tax collector went away justified. Why? Because he recognized and admitted his state of heart, and his standing before God as someone in need. The Pharisee was already full. He also had material resources (as the Pharisees did), but he lacked an awareness of his inner emptiness that showed his dependence on God, and he lacked gratitude. He was full of himself, and then compared himself to others and found himself superior. As if that was more pleasing to God.

So, material poverty does not necessarily equate to being poor in spirit. Even king David, who was probably the wealthiest person in Israel at that time, calls himself “poor and needy.” Psalm 86 is but one example of several places where David says this, and things like it. It sure doesn’t seem like that’s the case with him; we think of David as a great warrior, and the leader who slew Goliath. But what made David great was not his wealth or his might or his leadership, but his recognition that he was also a person in total need of God’s help.

Dorothy Day (passed away in 1980), Catholic social activist who lived a simple, almost monastic, life and became a hero to many who went to work trying to alleviate poverty in America. Dorothy Day wrote a lot and spoke a lot about working with the materially poor. During one of her training sessions for social workers and others who wanted to work for the poor, she warned the group that

if they wanted to embark on this vocation of helping the materially poor, it needed to be a true calling and not just a romantic notion of doing good, or of expecting to receive a pat on the back from those they were helping. And in her workshops, she always gave a little talk about what she called the “ungrateful poor.”

That notion offended some people, but they later learned that she was speaking truth, and some of these workers burned out because they expected to be seen as heroes by the people they were helping and receive some sort of reward for their work. Like she said, the work has to be reward in itself because it’s the right thing to do, and it needs to be a true calling. Now, there are a lot of grateful ones who do express their gratitude at the help they are receiving. Dorothy Day simply wanted people to examine themselves, and perhaps their own inner need as they embarked on the work of justice in the world.

I had a Catholic friend years ago who said that her parochial school teacher taught them that this beatitude and the bible’s other teachings about the poor meant God loves poor people *more*. That God favored poor people more. That’s not what this beatitude means, or the other teachings about the poor.

Now, God does clearly call his people *who have material resources* to care for the poor. That’s clear and unequivocal. To acquire and keep and not help

those who are poor is wrong. That is clear from the beginning of the bible to the end. Read the prophets, especially! And the parable Jesus told about the foolish man who tore down his adequate barns to build bigger barns to hold all this stuff. The Bible is pretty clear about the call to serve those in need. But nowhere does it say that poverty equates to holiness necessarily, or that God loves poor people *more*. Jesus did not say “blessed is poverty” as if that were better.

God does not love anybody more than another. As Pope Francis has said, “God loves the prostitute as much as the Pope, the pagan as much as the priest, the atheist as much as the canonized saint, those with riches as much as those in rags.” God loves everyone equally. And unconditionally.

So, getting to the point... the issue in this beatitude—and even in Luke’s version which *does* say “Blessed are the poor”—the issue isn’t that God loves the poor or the poor in spirit *more*. Rather, in a world where people saw the poor, the poor in spirit, the marginalized, the grieving, the meek and humble and so forth, as *not* blessed, or less than, or excluded, or you must have done something wrong to deserve this, Jesus is saying, “God loves them too! They are ***not*** excluded!” In fact, God blesses them.

In Jesus’ day—and this is probably true today in many Christian circles—the poor and poor in spirit were to be *pitied*. And kept at the margins, like others

who were the not-blessed. So, what Jesus is doing here, and in all of the beatitudes, is taking these people and rescuing them from the margins and putting them front and center and saying, “These people are *also* God-blessed. Do you see them? God sees them. Don’t forget about them.” Because when they’re at the margins they’re easy to ignore and not have to deal with.

With the beatitudes, Jesus is bringing them back into the fold: “God loves them too; I want you to see that.” And to those who experience such things—poverty of spirit, grief, being a quiet and modest (meek) person—this is great news! If you are poor in spirit right now, at the end of your rope for whatever reason, the Kingdom of heaven is yours! It’s available to you! Receive it. And, know that Jesus wants you to be seen and heard and embraced, not just by God but by God’s people too. This is why Jesus spent so much time with people on the margins—sinners and tax collectors and other assorted ragamuffins. He was bringing them back to the center. Or, maybe, he was bringing the center out to the margins by going there... (there’s something to think about! As one of the medieval mystics said, “The center is everywhere and nowhere at the same time”).

Jesus spent time with people like this humble tax collector from the parable, who was poor in spirit—empty, to use the root meaning of the word—

because he knew that he needed mercy and help, who went away filled with God's blessing. Jesus is putting him into the fold, pulling him away from the margins and placing him front and center for his followers to see. Do you see this man? He's blessed! Someone who was labeled a sinner, excluded, and looked down upon, is an inheritor of the Kingdom.

As we approach communion this morning, in reflecting on the beatitude and the illustration from Jesus, we have the opportunity to ask ourselves: What am I filled with? What is my need today? Not that I try earn or achieve blessedness, but that I put myself in a posture of openness, to receive the gifts God wants to give me.

And I thought of the apostle Paul's words in Philippians 2, who said that Jesus "emptied" himself. We might say that he *willingly* became poor in spirit, and let God fill him with love—for you, for me, and for all.

Prayer: God, give me eyes to see more of what you see. When we pray this, perhaps we, too, can empty ourselves like Jesus, and let God fill us with love.

Song of preparation: Feed us, Lord