

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

This fall we are reflecting on the Beatitudes. In the beatitudes we are given an invitation to see as Jesus sees. They are not to-do list, or a teaching on ethical behavior. They aren't a quaint set of poetic sayings to mat and frame and put on a wall. 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 how things are... in God's world—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 that describes a

contradiction in terms, when two words are put together that have opposite or contradictory meanings. For example: 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 Jesus did not intend it this way: "Blessed" and "poor" are two words you don't ever find in the same sentence, except here. That could apply to most of the beatitudes, actually.

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—whether it's a chosen emptiness, like Jesus, who, the apostle Paul says, "emptied himself," willingly; or whether it's an emptiness that occurs because of circumstance. Being poor in spirit describes a kind of 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 for "poor" literally means "the empty ones;" it can mean those who have nothing, materially—empty pockets and purses—and it means "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.

If we turn this around, we realize that the opposite of emptiness, or of 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 whether it's our own unhelpful attitudes & thinking that we can't seem to change by our own willpower. 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, because we are open to receiving what we truly need. 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, based on Jesus' teaching—he taught about it a lot! Especially in the parables, most of which begin with the phrase, "The Kingdom of heaven is like..." And know that this Kingdom is for those who recognize 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 being materially poor. That interpretation has been made over the years and it's not 100% accurate. It

could be true—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 need for dependence on God. And, it needs to be pointed out, he lacked gratitude. He was full of himself, and then compared himself to others and found himself superior. Because, he still had the worldview, and belief, that "blessed" and "poor in spirit" was an oxymoron, and that God favored some people over others.

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.” There are several places in Psalms where David says this, and things like it, in his prayers. 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 a take-charge leadership style, but his recognition that he was also a person in total need of God’s help. It made him humble, and kind. Would that we had leaders today who recognized that! Leaders with that kind of humility.

In this beatitude—in each of the beatitudes, actually—Jesus is levelling the playing field. He is saying, “God loves everyone, equally.” There is no hierarchy of who is blessed more than others, or who God loves more than others, as if God has favorite children. The ground is levelled here.

I had a Catholic friend 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, quite 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 Old Testament prophets, especially! And the parable Jesus

told about the foolish man who tore down his perfectly 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, 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 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. Would that people in leadership recognized that, too. Especially people who claim to be Christian leaders! Who still hold onto the very old and wrong and backwards view that blessing from God equates to material prosperity, and that wealthy people are the ones who are favored by God.

So, getting to the point... the issue in this beatitude—and even in Luke’s version of the beatitude, 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. The Kingdom of heaven is theirs too.

In Jesus’ day—and this is probably true today in some 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 and hurting people. He was bringing them back to the center. Or, maybe, he was bringing the center out to the margins by going there himself and taking his followers there.

Now there's something to think about! As one of the medieval mystics said, "In God's Kingdom, the center is everywhere and nowhere at the same time." That sounds like quantum physics to me, but I have come to learn that spirituality and quantum physics have a lot in common.

Jesus spent time with people like this 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. And after spending time with Jesus, these people 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 is my need today? What is my hunger? Or... what am I filled with that I need to empty myself of, so I can create space for God? Not so I try to earn or achieve blessedness, but so I put myself in a posture of openness, to receive the gifts God wants to give me.

Again, we are reminded 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: All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly