

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

First in Lenten Sermon Series on the Beatitudes

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

March 10, 2019

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Every year the season of Lent takes us on a counter-cultural journey as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ toward the cross, in anticipation of a joyful Easter resurrection, the culmination of our spiritual pilgrimage. We began this Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday with the reminder smudged across our foreheads that we are dust and to dust we shall return, giving thanks to God that we are accompanied by Christ throughout our lives in all that makes us human.

For these forty days, we pack away our Alleluias, and we contemplate the great mystery of our faith: that in the person of Jesus Christ, God chose to embrace the human experience fully, even unto death. God does not take away all human suffering, but rather chooses to enter into it – so that we are never alone in ours. I think we all understand why this observance of Lent is a counter-cultural one. The ways of the world would have us believe that the best life has to offer is about winning over losing, about acquiring rather than giving away, about having a life more blessed with pleasure than pain, more happiness than hardship. But those of us who find ourselves called to follow Jesus are meant to live by a different set of values.

The Kingdom of God draws us into a human community that is set apart by leveling of the playing field, by a wide welcome of all people – no matter their station in life, by a particular compassion toward the poor and down-trodden, and by an admission that we are all sinners in need of the grace and mercy of God. In a time when there seems precious little to agree on in the public square, the church is the place that proclaims a center of gravity in Jesus Christ who binds us together in this enterprise of simply being human, and standing in need of God' grace. These blessings, with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, proclaim a present reality and a future promise for all of humankind.

God's favor is granted to those whom society regards as the ones left behind: the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the merciful, those hungering for justice, the pure-hearted, the makers of peace and those mistreated for doing justice. Now, the tricky thing for us type-a, worker bee Christians is that these are largely not qualities and characteristics we can

achieve; they are not entrance requirements into the Kingdom of God. Rather they are blessings in the present and future tense. Jesus is not asking the crowd around him to become poor in spirit, or mourners, or persecuted; instead he offers consolation to those who find themselves spiritually poor and in mourning and persecuted.¹

In his commentary on Matthew, Tom Long makes a helpful comparison of how the Beatitudes function at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. He reminds us of the Preamble of the Constitution of the United States: “We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” This introductory statement defines the essence of our nation’s vision and expresses the sort of citizenry it hopes to embody.

In a similar manner, Tom Long notes, “the Sermon on the Mount is the ‘constitution’ of the church of Jesus Christ, and the Beatitudes are its ‘preamble.’” They proclaim the essence of God’s Kingdom, and describe the sort of citizenry it embodies.² They set the stage for the purpose of every holy law that follows in the Sermon on the Mount: be reconciled to your brother or sister before you lay your gift upon the altar; love your enemies; don’t be like the hypocrites who pray to God in public to show how pious they are, but pray in secret; don’t store up treasures on earth, but store up treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is your heart will be also. Don’t worry about tomorrow, for today’s trouble is enough for today; do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The whole Sermon on the Mount will establish the guideposts for a new kind of human community, and the Beatitudes introduce how those who live under the power of the kingdom of heaven will demonstrate a flat out reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large. The biblical scholar

¹ Jon Walton, unpublished Moveable Feast paper, 1/30/11 quoting Van Driel.

² Tom Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, p. 46-7.

puts it this way: “We live in a world that pronounces benediction over the self-sufficient, the assertive and the power brokers. Yet the people whom the world would see as pitiful – the mournful and the persecuted – are the very people Jesus claims to be joyful.”³

Here on the first Sunday of Lent, it’s worth noting that while these blessings are not meant to be achieved, all of us will come to embody some of them at one time or another. Take, for example, the first on the list: *Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*. What do the poor know for sure? That they cannot rely on their own resources; they are not self-sufficient, and they know it. Likewise, the poor in spirit – know that their identity and security come from God.

The woman in our reading from Luke’s gospel was bent over from a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. We don’t use that word, “crippled,” like we used to, thank God. If you look up the word in the dictionary you understand why. “Crippled” descends from an Old English word that means “to creep.” Originally, it referred to a partially disabled person, but over time the word came to take on connotations of a person being inferior, worn out, not whole. And so when consciousness was rightly raised about the power of words we use to describe people, we did away with the common usage of the word “crippled” for a broader more inclusive term: disabled, or, better yet, differently-abled. However, for the purposes of understanding Luke’s story about this woman, bent over by a crippled spirit, here the word is really intended to dredge up all those negative connotations – inferior, worn out, not whole. I imagine a lot of us can relate to this woman’s having a “crippled spirit.”

We remember moments, or even long seasons in our lives when that spiritual part of us that should be soaring was instead downcast, depressed, bent out of shape. If you have honest conversations with people about their spiritual lives, you will soon discover that most do not describe it a smooth sailing. We know what it’s like to feel that our relationship with God is more

³ Tom Long, *ibid.*

about doubt and questioning, and less about trust and rejoicing. More than a few of us know when our relationship with God gets doubled over with spiritual pain.

Remember what we discovered about that saint of a woman, Mother Teresa, after she died? How she had long seasons of questioning her faith when she felt no presence of God whatsoever. From the outside, we had assumed that her tireless ministry among the poorest of the poor must have been fueled by an unshakable faith. But on the inside she described her spiritual life using words such as “darkness,” “loneliness,” and “torture.” While the world watched her heed the call of Christ, whom she was convinced asked her directly to minister to the poor with undying compassion, she was simultaneously writing in silence: “Where is my Faith – even deep down, right in there is nothing, but emptiness and darkness – My God – how painful is this unknown pain – I have no faith.”

We – who question our own spiritual poverty from time to time – do well to remember Mother Teresa’s spiritual angst amid all her good works, as the editor of her writings has suggested that her honest candor about her inner life “may be remembered as just as important as her ministry to the poor – because it would be a ministry to people who had experienced some doubt, some absence of God in their lives. And you know who that is?” her editor asked - responding, “Everybody. Atheists, doubters, seekers, believers, everyone.”⁴

Interestingly, the woman in our scripture does not ask to be healed, just as most people with spiritual poverty often don’t know how to ask for help. She simply finds herself in Jesus’ presence, and he heals her, because what Jesus wants is to bless those whose spirit is impoverished – even if it means he is breaking with the Sabbath laws of his day; this healing is a counter-cultural act.

⁴ “Mother Teresa’s Crisis of Faith,” time.com, 8/23/07.

Jesus wants us to be in right relationship with God and with one another, to be at home under our own skin, to be restored to the community of faith. And so when our spirits are bent over by internal turmoil, or external pressures, by illness or anxiety, by depression or despair; Jesus says: we are blessed; we become the first in line in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the coming weeks, we will unfold the blessings of the Beatitudes, one or two at a time, and I hope that on this Lenten journey together we will discover how they enfold us, how they embrace us by the present and future promises of God, and how they help us be more like Christ, who embodies every one of these blessings himself.

AMEN.