

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit
Psalm 12; Matthew 5:1-12

"We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom , power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants." (Omar Bradley).

Let us pray for illumination.

In your mind transport yourself back to ancient Galilee, there you were wander upon a crowd of folks listening to Jesus, you immediately noticed that they were mostly poor. You do find some of the wealthy elite; you recognize Nicodemus as one of them. But the overwhelming majority of them are poor. Because of the economic system, the crushing Roman taxes, the demographics of people living off the land, clustered in tiny hamlets, the poor are everywhere and they are the ones coming to hear Jesus.

The Greek word used in this passage for poor leads us to understand that these folks were not just low on funds, sort of like most of us are a few days before payday. Or poor like the times in college where we rolled pennies for gas money and ate Kraft Macaroni and Cheese because it was the cheapest thing we could buy at the grocery store – we only thought we were poor and for most our condition was temporary. But the word here means even more than that kind of poor it means poor to the point that they were trapped in poverty, a poverty that was miserable, oppressing and humiliating. And here comes Jesus saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Poor, miserable, oppressed and humiliated and Jesus says they are blessed.

To people who had no hope, who were never insiders to anything – Jesus was like a breath of the freshest air they had ever breathed. In Luke's version of this sermon, the one we looked at last week, Jesus preaches the Beatitudes right after he had touched and healed a leper, an outcast among outcasts; after he had healed a paralytic. Paralytics were not only poor but had no means of support or ability to support themselves, they were reduced to the only means of income - begging. He spoke these words after hanging out with a tax collector. If you look down on the IRS today, tax collectors in Palestine had a lower opinion rating than the US Congress. These were Jews who worked as agents for Rome to extract taxes, essentially bilking the poor of their hard-earned and desperately needed money. In other

words, these people gathering around Jesus, were the least, the lame, and the lost. Jesus was like a magnet and these the poorest of the poor were attracted to him like metal to a magnet. And he began his best sermon saying, "Blessed are the poor."

Well by the time Matthews account came out he had added "in spirit;" "Blessed are the poor in spirit." To our ear, this one makes more sense, after all what can be blessed about poverty? When John Kennedy was running for the senate, he was asked by a poor man, "Mr. Kennedy, do you know what it's like not to be able to pay your bills; to wonder how you'll get food on the table; to struggle to make ends meet? Do you know what it's like to be poor?" Kennedy did not even try to pretend that he knew and simply answered, "No, I don't know what it's like to be poor." The man said to him, "Well you haven't missed anything."

I don't think Jesus was glamorizing poverty and neither should we. One only has to be a pastor, or sit in Christina's chair to know the number of people, most legitimately who are in desperate need – no money for food, no money for medicine and no where to turn. There is nothing glamorous about being poor. Yet, to Jesus the Kennedy's of the world as well as most of us who are not desperately poor suffer a disadvantage spiritually.

You see when you have what you need and most of what you want we believe we can manage ourselves and our world quite well. We can get what we need and most of what we want, and we can thank ourselves for it, thank you very much! When we are in this state, we suffer spiritually, for we are easily deluded into believing we can manage our world. We are spiritually poor because we have lost that utter dependence upon God. We close ourselves up to who God really is. In his book, The Ladder of the Beatitudes, Jim Forest wrote, "Being poor in spirit means believing the myth that the more I possess, the happier I will be."¹

Tell that to the 50 something vice-president who was laid off and has been out of work for a year. Or to the woman who has been diagnosed with breast cancer or the parents whose teenager daughter has run away from home with "that" boy. Tell a mother with three children whose husband has just announced he's leaving that she has managed her world quite well. That's when our neatly packaged, perfectly managed little worlds fall apart. That is when we can begin to

¹ Forest, page 22

understand our own poverty. Anne Lamott wrote once that the two best prayers I know are, "Help me, help me, help me" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

It is when we understand that this life is very fragile and that when the wrapping comes off the package the contents may be circumstances unwanted, unimaginable and not of your managing or making. It is then when we realize our utter need for God.

Add to this, the messiness of life, our own confusion about our own identity is that our very efforts to flee poverty can block the very grace that God has for us. Frederick Buechner said it this way, "We live our lives like a clenched fist. The clenched fist can do many things: it can work, hang on to things, impress, even fight. But the one thing the clenched fist cannot do is accept, even from the good God himself, a helping hand."

Blessed are the poor who can pray, "Help me, Help me, Help me."

Is Jesus saying in Luke, "Blessed are the poor"? Or is it a metaphor a mental image for us to meditate upon, or is it according to Matthew "Blessed are the poor in spirit"? Clarence Jordan was a man who read the Bible and thought he was suppose to do what it said. He created a commune when no one had ever heard of a commune. It was in the 1940's in rural Georgia. It was a farm commune and both whites and blacks owned and worked the land in common. Needless to say Jordan was the object of the KKK's attention. Preaching on this question – poor or poor in spirit he said, "If you have a lot of money, you'll probably say spiritual poverty. If you have no money, you'll probably say physical poverty. The rich will thank God for Matthew: the poor for Luke. Whose right? Chances are neither. For it is exactly this attitude of self-praise and self-justification and self-satisfaction that robs us of a sense of great need for the kingdom and its blessings. When one says, "I don't need to be poor in things; I'm poor in spirit," and another says, "I don't need to be poor in spirit; I'm poor in things," both are justifying themselves as they are saying in unison, "I don't need." With that cry on our lips, no one can repent."²

Those who are truly poor in spirit do not try to justify themselves. They do not puff themselves up. They are humble and they are aware of their need. They are utterly dependent upon and open to God.

² Clarence Jordan, Sermon on the Mount, page 20

One of the great ironies of the Christian faith is that our own spirituality can be our great nemesis to our relationship with God. As we immerse ourselves in the Bible; as prayer becomes to us as important as eating; as we build service to others into our routine, we begin to flex our spiritual muscle and some strange amnesia grips us and blocks out the sense of poverty that drove us to read the Bible and pray and serve in the first place.

In Luke he wrote, "Woe to you who are rich now, for you have your reward." How sad it would be if we are the type who prefer Matthew here, "Woe to the rich in spirit, for they have received their reward!" It would be tragic is after laboring in the spiritual vineyards we could self-pronounce the verdict: "How spiritual I am, and I thank God I am not like the other who are not." Or worst, to be flattered by and believe others who declare how spiritual you are. The question, the hard question if we seriously read the Beatitudes is, "Have I already received my reward?"

It is no accident that so much of Jesus' ministry was focused on the poor. In prayer and reflection, we are to contemplate our inner poverty, our mortality, our humble status before God.

The church seeks out the poor, for they remind us of our genuine poverty. It is not so that we who "have" can drop a few goodies on the "have not's." It is because we are poor and we want to be near the poor because when we are we will be near Jesus who was poor, and on the cross became even poorer for us. Blessed are the poor in spirit and in the bank vault; because, the wise know: we are all beggars before God.

In Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, John Ames was a Congregationalist pastor in Iowa who is writing the story of his life and that of his father and grandfather to pass down to his son who was born late in life and who he will not have the joy of watching grow up. In one of the stories about his grandfather who was a passionate abolitionist he wrote, "he never kept anything worth giving away, or let us keep it, either, so my mother said. He would give the laundry right off the clothes line ... I believe he was a saint of some kind."

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit ..." In his upside-down view of the universe, what do the poor, who usually have nothing usually have coming? Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven."