

The Beatitudes - Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

Ephesians 1:3-6, Matthew 5:1-12

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them saying...” And here begins the wonderful teachings of Jesus known as the Sermon on the Mount. The first part of that teaching as recorded in the Bible are known as the Beatitudes. Today we begin a 7 week series on this important passage of the Bible. They are sometimes referred to as the “Be-Happy Attitudes”, although we will discover that these words are more about living out the principles of Christlike character than trying to find happiness. These words are really about kingdom of God living, and the blessing of those who learn to live by them and seek to practice them in their daily walk. The Beatitudes have also been called the Christ’s manifesto of his kingdom. In this series we will be referring to the book, The Beatitudes for Today, written by Rev. James Howell...also the book we will be discussing in our Wednesday night gatherings.

So let’s begin with an open heart and mind ready to receive Jesus’ teaching for all of his disciples. You will notice that all of the Beatitudes begin with the word “Blessed”. There are some versions of the Bible that use the word “Happy”. But really the Greek word “Makarios” has a much deeper meaning of truly experiencing a state of spiritual fulfillment and peace. One of the blessings I had as a District Superintendent was to visit the many different churches on the district and to participate in different styles of worship and to meet many wonderful people. One of the joys I experienced was to worship at the Haven United Methodist Church, a largely African American church and enjoy the spirit of their worship. I remember when speaking with a dear lady who had been a long time member there...whenever I would ask her how she was doing, her answer was always the same: “I’m blessed.” It wasn’t: “I’m fine” or “I’m OK.” It was “I’m blessed”. That is a great expression of who we are in our relationship with the Lord. Rev. Howell in his book describes it like this: “Blessed really means wonderful news and it is God’s wonderful news. God is acting now through Jesus to turn the world upside down.” Being blessed is more about a state of being than fluctuating human emotions. Spiritual happiness is more about living as God calls us to live rather than seeking personal blessing or favor. Actually there are also

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some deeper meanings of this word from Aramaic which Pastor HeyYoung will share when she brings her message. For these words are not just about a state of being blessed for our own fulfillment, they are also a call to living out our faith, putting our faith into practice. I like to think of it like this. The Beatitudes express the reality of Jesus' prayer in the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And can't we use that kind of living in the world today. We as followers of Christ are called to live this kingdom life.

Today we begin with: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Actually when you go to the gospel of Luke, you read the words, Blessed are the poor, rather than the poor in spirit, which makes sense when you consider Luke's emphasis on compassion for those in need. Which words did Jesus really use? Poor in spirit could have been added later, or Jesus taught on a number of occasions and he could have used both, but what is most important is the living out the blessing of these words...Well, no one wants to be poor. And certainly in the culture we live in that pushes material success and prosperous living, to be poor seems to be the opposite of what we strive for. But to be poor is to acknowledge our own human limitations and frailties. That we are dependent on God for our daily needs and sometimes even survival. I guess that can become one of our biggest challenges as Americans. We have so much, we start to live as though we don't need God. We can take care of ourselves, we depend on our own abilities, and our self-sufficiency often stifles our spiritual growth.

So when we talk about being poor, we are also talking about poverty of spirit. A humble posture that recognizes the ultimate source of what we need in this life. That I am dependent on a Creator God who loves me, forgives me, and whose grace is sufficient for my every need. As one writer put it: "Being poor in spirit means letting go of the myth that the more I possess, the happier I'll be."

This first Beatitude teaches us an important lesson about spiritual blessing. Spiritual blessing is not dependent on success and happiness, it is connected to my relationship with God. It is connected to my trust in the God who is always with me and meets the needs of my heart. And this is the interesting discovery.

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It is often in the trying and difficult experiences that we find the reality of God's blessing. It is often when we go through deep waters that we become more aware of God's grace and strength. It is a reminder of the words of the prophet who said: "When you go through deep waters, I will be with you." We know that a lot of people have had to literally go through deep waters because of the powerful hurricanes of recent weeks. The trauma and the devastation caused by these storms have been horrific. And so many are still dealing with life-threatening conditions and an uncertain future. But in the midst of all of the chaos and disaster, there have been story after story of persons drawing upon the resources of their faith to get them through. And it has been heartening to see people reaching out to help others who were the victims of these storms. This picture shows some people of faith who gathered at an elderly widow's farm devastated by Hurricane Harvey. As they joined in this prayer circle here were people who were strangers and friends, older and younger, rural and urban gathered with a common purpose in a spirit of prayer and humility and ready to put their faith into practice in helping someone else. In all, there were *"17 Texans linked in a ring on Angie Klimple's front yard last Saturday afternoon, a circle of prayer broken only by the hay wagon that would soon carry away the putrid, sodden remnants of 50 years of her life. For Jeff Klimple, 59, a solid, sideburned engine mechanic with grease under his nails, the outpouring of support for his mother was too much to absorb. As he prayed aloud, his eyes reddened. Tears fell onto a white T-shirt already stained with sweat and grime. He paused to compose himself, without success. And in a spirit of humility he prayed: "Father, we come to you and thank you for all of these people you sent us, I thank you, Lord, for the things that you've given us, the grace and mercy that we take for granted."** It was the spirit of that prayer that we are called to live by. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." It is in midst of life's most trying circumstances, that we depend upon our faith in the Lord to carry on. For it is while facing life's challenge, life's spiritual hurricanes that we are moved to see our need to find God's help and strength.

I won't repeat the story of the hymn "It is Well with My Soul" for you probably have heard it many times. But the testimony of the writer H.P. Stafford who lost his children at sea is powerfully expressed in that hymn. That even "when sorrows

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like sea billows roll...even though Satan should buffet, and trials should come...let this blest assurance control. That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate and hath shed his own blood for my soul.” To be able to say: “It is well with my soul” even in the darkest night is the experience of God’s blessing in our lives. When I can have that perspective. When I can live with a humble dependence on God. When I can live with that poverty of spirit in my heart, than I will find the assurance of God’s care and blessing.

This morning we come to the Lord’s table...on this world communion Sunday. And we celebrate the things that bring us together as the people of God. In this world, that seems so divided...where all kinds of barriers are built between people, barriers around race, economic standing, politics, human sexuality. And so we come today to join hands with one another, and with persons of faith around the world. And we come recognizing that such unity is not possible when our human pride and personal ambitions get in the way...so we come, poor in spirit, humbly to the table. Remembering the one who humbled himself and washed his disciples’ feet, remembering the one who gave his very life for us. We come today in that spirit, with humility, expressing our dependency on the One who cares for us, so we can live with open hands and caring spirits in this world, we come to join our hearts in prayer for those who are suffering and those who are troubled in this world...yes, we come with that spirit of dependency upon the Lord, so we can live like we are in the kingdom of heaven. “ Blessed are the poor, the poor in spirit...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

*From the NY Times