

Where it Begins: “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”

Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20; Luke 18: 9-14

As we walk with Jesus toward the cross and resurrection the Beatitudes will be our guide. I call them “Building Blocks for the Church as a Community of the Kingdom of God.” They help us become what Martin Luther King called “The Beloved Community.”

We might also call them guides to our flourishing as children of God. Author Mark Scandrette calls them “The Nine-Fold Path of Jesus”¹, as Buddhists have their “Noble Eight-Fold Path”. What is this path? Right understanding, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These are practical guidelines for the spiritual life, for right living.

So the beatitudes are too. They guide us on the path of Jesus. We could call them spiritual postures and spiritual practices. Here is where they begin: “Blessed are the poor-in-spirit.

As Jesus opened his mouth to teach he began: “Blessed are the poor-in-spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” There are two words to explore before we get to the meaning of “poor-in-spirit.”

First, the word “blessed”. “Blessedness” was a spiritual state important in the Hebrew scriptures and psalms. Psalm 1 begins the whole book with this theme:

Happy, blessed, is the one

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked...

nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

(there are a lot of those around)

But whose delight is in the teaching of the Lord.

You might say the whole book of Psalms is about how to live a life of blessedness, happiness, wholeness.

Every Greek philosopher worth his salt wrote a treatise on “happiness” or *eudaimonia*. It was more than the feelings of being happy. It was the achievement of the good life, the virtuous life, the life of contentment and completeness. One Greek philosophy summed it up: “Happy are those who get everything they ask for, *provided they do not ask amiss!*” That’s the rub! Sometimes our “wanter” gets out of whack.

Sometimes the Greek word for blessed in the beatitudes is translated “happy”. But again, it is more than a feeling of happiness. It is the feeling of being in synch with God and with life, of contentment and completeness, of being who God made you to be. That’s what the word “perfect” means when Jesus says, “Be ye perfect as your *Abba* in heaven is perfect.” The goal is not “perfectionism”—which can be a deadly thing—but a completeness, being who God made you to be. One famous T.V. preacher wrote a book on the Beatitudes entitled, “*The Be Happy Attitudes*.” I don’t think that’s quite what Jesus had in mind.

The second word is “heaven”, as in “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. When Matthew used Jesus’ words “the kingdom of God”, he substituted “heaven” for “God” out of his Jewish reverence to avoid saying the name of God.

But this has led people over the centuries to think that the Kingdom of God was only about heaven, about the world to come. And this despite that Jesus taught us to pray everyday: “Thy kingdom come...on *earth* as in heaven.” The world to come will be the final healing, the final rejoicing, the final blessing, the completion of all life, but the kingdom of God Jesus taught was *Heaven’s Coming*—to us, to earth.

The kingdom of God Jesus preached was an “upside down kingdom” which was turning the world right-side up. The wisdom of the Beatitudes was deeper

and truer than “conventional wisdom”, the everyday assumptions of the world. In that sense the wisdom of the Beatitudes is countercultural.

In a sense then, they are like riddles whose truth is not apparent at first. “Blessed, happy, are the poor-in-spirit.” In Luke’s version Jesus says, “Blessed, happy are you who are poor.” How can this be? It startles our minds into action. The next beatitude: “Blessed, happy are the mourners.” What is going on here? There’s more here than meets the eye

II

Now we come to the phrase “poor-in-spirit”. This is where it all begins. It is, as Jesus says, our entry-way into the kingdom of God. “No one enters the kingdom except as a child”, Jesus said. And a child is characterized by full-out wonder and full-out need. We enter with our need.

The door to the kingdom is a low hung door. We need to bend down to get in. It is the door of a true humility. Someone quipped, “Few speak of humility humbly”, but I’ll try. The word humility comes from the word “humus”, meaning soil. We come from mud, good mud, yes, but still mud. We need the spirit of God to be truly human.

C.S. Lewis said that humility is “not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less!” That’s true, but that’s not where we are going today. Humility is

acknowledging the humanly limits to our power, wisdom, and yes, goodness.

Wendell Berry, in his poem, “To the Holy Spirit” prays, “By Thy wide grace show me Thy narrow gate.” The narrow gate is humility.

Humility means that we know ourselves to be more empty than full—and that’s a good thing. It means we are hungry and thirsty for God, for spirit, for life. Lent begins in hunger and thirst.

This emptiness opens us to grace. We make ourselves empty like a cup that we may be filled. And when we do, we experience grace. We experience it, to use Annie Dillard’s words, “like a man holding his cup under a waterfall.”

When Jesus began his list of spiritual commendations he started with the “poor-in-spirit”, not the spiritual giants, not the religious know-it-alls, but with the poor-in-spirit.

Zen Buddhism teaches what it calls *shoshin*, a “beginner’s mind”. It is the opposite of the expert mind. It is learning from scratch; it’s a mind open to the new. We empty our minds of what we think we know. Zen master Suzuki says, “in the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert mind there are few.” Being poor-in-spirit is adopting a beginner’s mind. Jesus did not say, “Unless you become as an expert you shall not enter the kingdom of God!”

III

Now we come to the parable of the day. Early on the parables were titled by the first line. For example, what we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son is “A man had two sons.” Sometimes our titles give away the punch-line, ruin the surprise of the parable. Today’s parable: “Two men went up into the temple to pray.”

One man was a Pharisee: The Rev. Dr. I. B. Perfect, B.A. M. Div. Ph.D., STD. He stood apart from the others, and prayed: “God, I thank you that I’m not like other men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or like that tax-collector over there. Let me keep my distance lest I be contaminated. I fast twice a week, not once, twice! I give tithes of all I get, all, let no one forget!” (The pharisees in the gospels were not always bad guys, just the ones like this one.)

But the other man, the tax-collector. He stood at a distance from the others—like those who slip in and out of church hoping not to be noticed. As he prayed he would not even raise his eyes to heaven. He beat his breast in spiritual sorrow and prayed: “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” The Pharisee babbled on and on to God. The tax-collector, a seven-word prayer.

Now Jesus gives the punch-line:

I tell you this man went back to his house that night right with God, rather than the other.

Then he added what he said over and over. “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

It is God’s upside-down kingdom which is righting the world. The British poet R.S. Thomas wrote a poem called “The Kingdom.” It described Jesus’ kingdom of God and how we enter:

The Kingdom

It’s a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It’s a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.²

Here is how we enter the kingdom: with our need only and the simple offering of your faith, as green as the first leaves of the spring. This season would you like a new faith, green as a leaf?

The wisdom of the first beatitude is captured in the mystery novels by Louise Penny. Senior Inspector Gamache is training a new assistant. “There are four sentences that lead to wisdom”, he said to her. “Are you ready for them?” Here they are:

I don't know

I need help

I'm sorry

I was wrong.

This is the beginning of wisdom and the meaning of the “poor-in-spirit.” May God's wide grace lead us to this narrow gate.

Amen

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1. Mark Scandrette, *The Nine-Fold Path of Jesus, The Nine-Fold Path of Jesus: Hidden Wisdom of the Beatitudes* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2021)
 2. R.S. Thomas, “The Kingdom”, *Later Poems* (London: MacMillan, 1984), 35.