

## **SERMON “BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT”**

(Matthew 5:1-12 Preached at MPC on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

The scripture text today from Matthew’s Gospel, along with several others, is what I would characterize as a key or cornerstone scripture. This sermon is Jesus' full Inaugural Address in which he lays out his vision of life in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God" out of reverence for God's name. The terms are synonymous. In this sermon on the mount, Jesus outlines the principles by which God’s kingdom is ruled. It is a not set of rules for worldly success, but instead a glimpse at rules that govern the kingdom—a mirror-image world where everything seems backwards—where the poor are blessed rather than the rich—where the meek inherit the earth.

Friends, we don’t have to wait for eternity to see the kingdom, because it’s right here in our midst. Jesus proclaims, "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17; 10:7; see also 12:28). The kingdom is any place where God reigns. The kingdom of heaven comes near whenever a person chooses to serve God. Jesus' disciples live with one foot in this world and one foot in the kingdom. This world rewards selfish, aggressive behavior, but Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek and gentle.

See if you can finish this sentence: "I'll be happy when...." There must be a million possible endings for that sentence. "I'll be happy when.... If you’re young and starting out in life you might say, "I'll be happy when I grow up and move away from home—Or I'll be happy when summer comes and I don't have to go to school.

As you get a little older you might say, I'll be happy when I fall in love and get married and start my own family. Or I'll be happy when I can buy a new car and then your first home. As you keep working you might say, I'll be happy when I get promoted. And finally, that day comes when you might say, I'll be happy when I retire. As a believer, you’ll say at the end of your life, I’ll be happy when I go home to be with the Lord in heaven!

When will you be happy? What will it take? What are the chances that it's going to happen? How long will it be? One year? Five years? Fifty years? Jesus has some

wisdom on the subject. His wisdom might not make much sense to you. What he has to say seems exactly backwards—upside down. When you hear what Jesus has to say, you may want to stay tuned and keep an open mind—Just don't dismiss Jesus too quickly. Many people have tested Jesus' wisdom and found it true. It just takes some getting used to. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The first thing that we need to notice is that Jesus changes the vocabulary. He doesn't talk about happiness, although some translations of the Bible use the word "happy" instead of the word "blessed."

But "blessed" in the Greek word, 'makarios', is a better translation because of the ways that we use the word "happy." Happiness is taking the summer off—or getting promoted—or getting a new car—or maybe watching the Falcons thump the Patriots in this year's Super Bowl. But Jesus has something different in mind—something that goes deeper—something that seems strange when we first hear it. Jesus says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Blessed are those who mourn. "Blessed are the gentle—the meek." "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness"

Now you see what I mean by upside down. These are not the rules as we know them of the world. The rules of the world say, "Blessed are the rich, because they can buy what they want. Blessed are the strong, because they can take what they want. Blessed are winners, because it is no fun to lose—no matter what the game. Blessed are those who hunger at the best restaurants, because they will be filled."

But Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. He goes even further, giving us a total of eight beatitudes. I can't do justice to all eight in the time that I have, so I'll treat just this first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." I believe that approach to be valid, because the first beatitude is foundational, like the first of the Ten Commandments.

You see, the first four beatitudes (poor in spirit, mourn, meek, and hunger and thirst for righteousness) describe the heart of the person who is in a right relationship with God. The remaining beatitudes (merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and the persecuted) describe how such a person relates to other people. The important thing to remember is if you're in synch with the first beatitude— "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—you'll be in synch with all of them. If you are out of synch with it, you'll be out of synch with all of them.

The Greek word that's translated "poor" is ptochos (p-toe-CHOS). Ptochos means abject poverty. True poverty is a cruel thing. It breaks people. Poor people suffer. Confronted daily with their own helplessness, the poor know the difference that even a small act of mercy can make. The poor watch eagerly for a gesture or a glance that might promise help. The poor long for a bit of kindness. The poor crave a bit of dignity. Standing before God, the poor in spirit are like that. They bring nothing in their hands that God needs—and nothing in their hearts that compels God to accept them. The poor in spirit come to God in poverty—hoping that God will provide. They come to God in their brokenness—hoping that God will mend them. The poor in spirit come to God in their sin—hoping to be forgiven. The poor in spirit come to God in their grief—hoping to be comforted. The poor in spirit come to God in their illness—hoping to be healed. They don't come bargaining with God, because they have nothing to offer. It is their humility that makes them fertile soil to receive God's blessings.

So Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Blessed are those who come to God on their knees. That isn't our preferred mode of travel—on our knees. We prefer to stand on our feet—to be in control. We like to pay for what we get. We like not to be in anyone's debt. We like to pay cash on the barrelhead. We like to dictate terms. But Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...." We fight hard not to be poor in spirit. We try to get the best grades we can—so we can get the best job that we can. We work as hard as we can—and do the best that we can. We try desperately to be in control of our lives.

Our best efforts leave us exhausted. Some years ago, Newsweek magazine ran a cover on which there was only one word in large bold letters. It said EXHAUSTED! Inside, it told of people—everyone from the president of Harvard—to housewives—to single moms—to a father trying to juggle two jobs. They were all EXHAUSTED! Can you identify with that?

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." We're exhausted, in part, because we are not poor in spirit. We're proud—so desperate to be in control—so desperate to do it our way. And so we spend so much energy on trivial things. We work long hours—to buy things we don't need—to impress people we don't like. Why do we do it? In her book, "More in Anger", American author Marya Mannes from the early 19<sup>th</sup> said: "American men are obsessed with money; American women are obsessed with weight. The men talk of gain; the women talk of loss, and I don't know which talk is the more boring."

In his book, “The Way to Go”, Pastor Gilbert Bowen tells about a young boy admitted to the hospital with terrible injuries. Shortly thereafter, the boy's father arrived. It was clear from his manner and his clothing that the father had money and was accustomed to giving orders. As the doctor tried to care for the boy, the father began to shout, "Why aren't you doing something? I want the best care that money can buy. I want you to fly him to the best specialists in the country. Do something for my boy!" The physician turned to the father and said, “Sir, there’s nothing that your money can do for your boy. All we can do is wait—and pray.”

When I read that story, I wondered about that father. My first thought was that he probably didn't know how to pray. He was accustomed to demanding what he wanted. He was accustomed to throwing his money on the table and saying, "Wrap it up!" I doubt that he knew how to pray for what he wanted. I felt sorry for him, because he was facing a terrible crisis in his life, and his stunted spirituality left him badly unprepared.

But Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." It occurred to me that this terrible moment might have brought the father face to face with his own inadequacy—that in this crisis, the father might have recognized the deep need he had so long ignored and now, the father might have become poor in spirit—finally able to approach God on his knees—to acknowledge that he had nothing to bring to the table—finally able to plead without his money for God's mercy. It struck me that this might have been a turning point in his life—that in his brokenness he might have been able, for the first time, to receive God's blessing.

Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest and author, once met Mother Teresa in Rome. The first thing he noticed about her was her constant focus on Jesus. People were asking questions, and she was answering in a way that reflected her total focus on Jesus. Her answers sounded, at first blush, simplistic and naive. But Nouwen sensed, not only her own personal strength, but also the subtle power of her answers. When Nouwen finally had an opportunity to speak with Mother Teresa, he told her of his problems. He spoke of his struggles. He asked her advice. She answered simply, "If you spend one hour a day in contemplative prayer and never do anything which you know is wrong, you'll be all right."

Listen to that one more time. It sounds simplistic, but it's really profound. "If you spend one hour a day in contemplative prayer and never do anything which you know is wrong, you'll be all right." Nouwen says, "With these words she answered none—as well as all of my problems. It was now up to me to be willing to move to the place where that answer could be heard."

So the meaning of this first beatitude and for all eight beatitudes—is that God blesses us when we come to him with empty hands—humbly bowing before His throne of grace—ready to receive whatever blessing that God chooses to give us—ready to follow in whatever path God chooses to lead us. The promise is this. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "theirs WILL BE the kingdom of heaven." He says, "theirs IS the kingdom of heaven present tense! We don't have to wait for the kingdom—we can enter it right now.

Friends as we begin this new year of 2017, no matter what circumstances we may be in right now or down the road, my prayer issued through the song "The Servant's Prayer and through our scripture text, is a call to listen—to take heart to Jesus' words in Matthew 5: 1, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Let us approach God's throne of grace with the attitude to be—Beatitude of "poor in spirit" knowing God's promises that when our need is greatest— there we will find God—and there we will find God's blessing. Amen!