

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

Text: Matthew 5:3
(Matthew 18:12-14)
LHUMC 2/16/14
Beatitudes series #2

I. Introduction

- A. Last week I began by asking you all the question that is always raised whenever we consider the Beatitudes. “At this moment, do you think you are blessed?” and we talked about how the answer to that question is affected both by what’s going on in your life and how you define the word “blessed”.
 - 1. And my guess is that even in Jesus’ original audience, there on the mountaintop, some would have answered “yes” and others “no”.
 - 2. If anything, there would have been more “no’s” than “yes” because by and large, those listening to him that day would have been the poor and outcast of his society.
 - 3. And even back then, before Jesus came along and turned the definition of what it meant to be blessed on its head, the cultural understanding of what being blessed looked like was pretty similar to ours—the more you have, materially and spiritually, the more blessed you are.
- B. As we begin to look at the first Beatitude, it’s probably helpful to notice that in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, Jesus says only, “Blessed are the poor.”
 - 1. This is much more specific than what we just heard Jesus say in Matthew, and we shouldn’t be surprised that in Luke, his words are addressed to those who are just plain poor because in Luke, there is always the emphasis that Jesus came to serve the poor.
 - 2. When Matthew adds “in spirit”, it’s probably a good thing for us who by worldly standards at least, most definitely aren’t “poor” in a material sense, but we all probably have had times when we might have been “poor in spirit”.
 - 3. So if anything, Matthew’s version of the first Beatitude is more inclusive. We get the notion that Jesus is blessing us, too.
- C. But at the same time it also raises another very basic question in my mind—what does it mean to be “poor in spirit”?
 - 1. Because if it is to the “poor in spirit” that Jesus offers the kingdom of heaven, then it’s pretty important to figure out what that means.

2. And my guess is that like last week's question, how you answer that question has a lot to do with what's going on in your life.
- II. My own working definition of what it's like to be poor in spirit has always come from my own life experiences and from the opportunities I've had to be with people in all stages and situations of life.
- A. Specifically, what I have always understood is that it is at the times when we are struggling that we know best what it is like to be poor in spirit.
 1. When we experience despair, it's easy to become poor in spirit.
 2. When we are feeling hopeless, it's easy to become poor in spirit.
 3. When anything in life comes along and messes up our equilibrium, it's easy to become poor in spirit.
 4. When it's just plain hard to get up in the morning, that is what it looks like and feels like to be poor in spirit.
 5. And so if I were to ask you, how many of you are feeling "poor in spirit", if we use that definition, there would no doubt be some hands that went up, because we all have times like that.
 - B. At our worship brainstorming a few weeks ago when we were talking about this, someone remembered a video that we'd shown a number of years ago that showed some people going through life at moments that could have been times when they would have been understandably feeling "poor in spirit". ("Lonely People" video)
 1. As I saw it again, I realized that video is actually a pretty good parable for this beatitude—when life has left you dry, Jesus comes to take you home. "Blessed are the poor in spirit (those who are high and dry) for Jesus will take them home to the kingdom of heaven."
 - C. So to be "poor in spirit" can depend on what is happening on our lives in a negative sense—when bad things happen, we can become "poor in spirit".
 - D. And again, that audience that gathered around Jesus to first hear his words would by and large have understood what it means to be "poor in spirit" like that and would have gained tremendous hope and strength in his words, as can we when we hear them in our times of being "poor in spirit".
 - E. And as I said last week, these beatitudes really do turn the cultural notion of what it looks like to be "blessed" completely on its head.
 1. In a time and place where we are taught to "buck up" and to "get over it" and to "move on", to suggest that we are blessed at those

times when we are having trouble doing so is counter-cultural to say the least.

- III. But then as I was reading “What Jesus Meant” , I came across another possible definition of what it means to be poor in spirit. You could call what we are dealing with “Definition #1” and “Definition #2” of what it means to be “poor in spirit” or you could call them different sides of the same coin.
- A. This way of being “poor in spirit” (this second definition) is especially for those of us experiencing the good times of life, when all is well for us materially and spiritually.
 - B. This way of being “poor in spirit” recognizes the reality that it is at those times when it is easy to get a little too full of ourselves and full of our stuff.
 - C. This way of being “poor in spirit” is a good thing, for it happens when we are able to get beyond all of that and refuse to be defined by our material stuff.
 - D. It is when we empty ourselves of all of that and attain what Erik Kolbell calls “spiritual poverty.” Here is how he describes it: “In spiritual poverty I can declare with full faith and confidence that I will not be defined by the car I drive, the reputation I hold, the company I keep, or the dinner party I did or did not get invited to, because spiritual poverty is liberation from the authority I assign to these and other things to serve as a measure of my worth, and the faith and willingness to look elsewhere for it...All that the world has to offer is never sufficient for us to purchase our goodness in the eyes of God, and so we are oddly freed from such fruitless strivings.
 - E. To me, this kind of “poor in spirit” sounds like the way we want to be.
 - F. And of course to refuse to be defined by our stuff and our status in life is just as countercultural as the first kind of “poor in spirit”.
 - G. When we become humbly dependent on God, people tend to look at us like we’re crazy. In a world that values self-sufficiency and independence and all the rest, it’s not very cool to admit that we are humbly dependent on God, that we are that kind of “poor in spirit”.
 - H. And so it strikes me that this second way of being poor in spirit may be even harder than the first because it’s natural for us to kind of like being full of ourselves and our stuff, and we so often hate to give that up.
 - I. With the first kind, stuff just happens, and we find ourselves being poor in spirit and it’s more or less out of our control.

- J. With this second kind, it is very much in our control—to be controlled by worldly things or not is always a choice that we make, just about every day.
- IV. So those are the possible definitions of what Jesus meant when he talked about those who were “poor in spirit.”
- A. And if I’m reading Erik Kolbell’s take on this correctly, the main point that he is making is that in the life of a Christian, there is a relationship between the two.
 - B. And the relationship goes something like this: until we achieve the second kind of “poor in spirit”, it’s going to be hard to reach out to those who are experiencing the first kind of being “poor in spirit”.
 - C. Until we humble ourselves, until we give up the control of our status and our stuff, it’s hard to help those who are hurting and hopeless.
 - D. Elsewhere, Jesus called this relationship between the two definitions of being “poor in spirit” servanthood.
 - E. Again and again, he talked about how we have to lower ourselves to the level of those we are called to serve—which is the same thing as saying we have to be the second kind of “poor in spirit” to help those who are the first kind of “poor in spirit.”
- V. So that’s the first half of the Beatitude. What about the second half?
- A. When I went to choose an accompanying scripture for this Beatitude, I faced a real dilemma—namely, everywhere you looked in the life and words of Jesus were reminders that the poor in spirit will be given the Kingdom of God.
 - B. I finally settled on this image of the shepherd and the sheep from a little later in Matthew.
 - 1. And given our two definitions of what it means to be “poor in spirit”, you could say that there are also two different kinds of sheep out there.
 - a) First is the one who doesn’t want to be “poor in spirit” anymore—the one who needs the loving and healing and forgiving shepherd to find him and bring him home.
 - b) The second sheep is the one who needs to be a little more “poor in spirit”—to empty himself of whatever it is makes him a little too full of himself.
 - c) And both sheep can easily become lost.
 - 2. And the good news of the second half of the beatitude is that God is constantly watching the sheep for those who are lost (cartoon).
 - 3. And the even better news God the shepherd has this wonderful way of blessing both kind of sheep—with a hug for the first kind

of sheep, and a gentle nudge, or maybe even a kick in the backside for the second kind of sheep as he seeks to bring them both back home, back to the kingdom.

VI. Conclusion

- A. At the end of the chapter in the book, Erik Kolbell tells the story of Oseola McCarty.
1. You might remember her story—she was a 90-year-old-plus woman in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, raised in poverty, who worked for decades taking in laundry for the well-to-do people of the town.
 2. She lived a simple life, in a small house that was her uncle's. Going to work, going to church, carrying a Bible that was so worn out it was held together with tape “so that 1st Corinthians wouldn't fall out.”
 3. In 1995, near the end of her life, completely out of the blue, she gave a \$150,000 donation (made up of money she had saved for over 70 years, a few dollars at a time) to Southern Mississippi University to begin a scholarship fund for underprivileged students. (picture)
- B. What makes that story so unique is that it has all of the strands of what it means to be “poor in spirit” running through it.
1. You have a woman who had every right to be the first kind of “poor in spirit”—living a tough life with low pay and hard work for all of those years.
 2. And yet when she gave that gift, you realize that she was “poor in spirit” in the second way—for the money obviously didn't mean anything to her personally, she saw it as a way to help others so that they might be lifted out of their own poverty.
- C. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”
1. When we are hurting and hopeless, we are blessed, for ours is the Kingdom of heaven.
 2. When we have figured out that to be poor in spirit can also be a good thing and have rearranged our priorities in life accordingly, we are blessed, for ours is the Kingdom of heaven.
 3. And in all those moments, we are blessed by the one who seeks us out and finds us, and brings us home.