

The Poor in Spirit

Essay 2 in the series “The Beatitudes”

The writer of the Gospel of Matthew sets forth as his keynote verse, the verse that begins his keynote text, our Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Poor in spirit? Really? What does it mean? And when it begins to dawn on us what it may just mean, who would really want it? For all the many fine qualities that go with being American, this is not one of them. And yet Jesus says: There are those who in their very poverty of spirit find joy, radiant joy, radiant, unshakable joy, a state called beatitude.

This is, however, about as counter-cultural as you can get. And it always has been. It was certainly counter-cultural when Jesus first said it. When Jesus first said it, Jewish revolt was in the air. The air in those days hung heavy with revolution, with militant national aspirations, with seething resentment of Roman occupation. People longed for the kingdom of God. And they were willing to fight for it, to take up arms, to do whatever it took to gain their freedom. Jesus says instead, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

BLESSED are those who recognize their own spiritual poverty, their absolute reliance on God and the grace of God.

BLESSED are the humble, those who are teachable, those who recognize the limits of what they know and understand, who listen, who know that others too have perspectives worth considering, who are open to life, to new ideas, to others, to changing circumstances, who can see something good even in a Roman centurion.

BLESSED are those who are freed from self, freed from ego, freed from the need to have things always go their way, freed from their own narrow, partial view of reality, freed from the need to always be acknowledged as right.

BLESSED are those who find delight in the moments of grace that are already always all around them, who find delight in simple gifts, in simple pleasures, in simple joys.

BLESSED are those who find their security, their identity, their sense of safety in God alone and not in anything else, who realize that there is no ground beneath their feet but God.

Theirs is a state called beatitude.

Nor is this a call to false humility or modesty; instead it’s the way to true strength. It may seem to us in America today counter-cultural, but the truth is – and this is a truth taught in all world literature and mythology – that everywhere the really creative acts, the acts that make a better world, are understood to involve some sort of dying to self, some sort of being poor in spirit.

Deep down inside, we have always known that. Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don't* identifies eleven companies who outperformed the market almost seven times over, over a period of fifteen years. He found that in every case their leaders were self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy, and that they hardly ever talked about themselves. There were no Donald Trumps.

So to those today obsessed with wealth, to those driven by a need for personal fame and glory, to those who in their ambition run roughshod over others: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

To those whose eyes blaze with a fierce alienating certainty, to those whose fear of government, of other Americans, of the future, borders on paranoia, to those who are prepared to take matters into their own hands in some kind of dark survivalist fantasy, to those who contribute to the culture of violence in our land: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Life illustrates this over and over, sometimes in the most unexpected places. The movie “Salmon Fishing in the Yemen” starring Ewan McGregor and Emily Blunt is the story of a Yemeni sheikh’s seemingly madcap notion to replicate salmon fishing in Scotland in Yemen, hot, barren, dusty Yemen. But underneath it all it’s really an exposition on faith. The two Brits have little faith; one of them says, “No one I know goes to church.” The Yemeni sheikh gently chides them for their lack of faith – for their not believing in miracles, and he tells them that fishing is like faith, “All it takes are patience, tolerance and humility.” All it takes, in other words, is being poor in spirit. Later when saboteurs destroy his project, the sheikh grants, “Maybe they have a point,” but then goes on himself to imagine a whole new way of doing it, a better way, more creative, more collaborative.

And still it takes soul work to grasp this foundational spiritual truth. Not even Jesus’ disciples caught on at first. So later in this same gospel, Matthew 20:20-28, the mother of James and John, the aunt of Jesus perhaps, comes to Jesus with her sons, kneels down, and asks that one of her sons might sit at his right and the other at his left in his kingdom. And it made a kind of sense. It was a perfectly “natural” request, especially for cousins of Jesus and men known elsewhere as “sons of thunder.” But remember Jesus’ response, now to all his apostles? “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as I, I, me (are you listening, guys?) did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many?” Jesus says this over and over in the Gospels. There is perhaps nothing he says more often. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

And this is my own personal experience. It has been on days, on those occasions, when I have felt most lost, least sure of my own way, when I have let go and simply let God’s will be done, that I have most often caught a glimpse of heaven. In my surrender, I have sensed euphoria, joy, unshakable joy, joy no longer dependent on my circumstances.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Theirs is a state called beatitude, a joy independent of chance, change and circumstance, a joy that no one can take from them. In their very poverty of spirit, they sense eternity all around them. Demanding nothing, all things are theirs. They are free. God’s love pours into them; joy and vitality pour out of them. They sense their oneness with God. They experience the divine flow all around them and in them. They are surrounded by grace. And they are filled with previously unimaginable power. They can do what they never could have done before. They feel they can touch the heavens; the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Theirs is a bliss nothing short of euphoria.

This is what Jesus calls his followers to – from the very beginning, from the keynote text in the Gospel of Matthew. This is what he used to teach his disciples. We learn this from the force of the verb in Matthew 5:2. This is what he kept teaching them. This is what he always taught them. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

– Dale Pauls