

The Beatitudes' Worship Series: "Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:1-12)
"Blessed are the Poor in Spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." (Verse 3)
Joshua 1:7-9; Psalm 144:2-4; Philippians 2:1-8
Salem United Methodist Church; July 8, 2018
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The Beatitudes are eight blessings that appear at the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Each blessing focuses on a particular human condition and each is followed by a promise. These eight blessings also introduce who Jesus is and what his mission on earth is. Each Sunday we will focus on one of these blessings in the order which they are listed in scripture. Today we are seeking to understand the first one, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

If someone asked you to summarize who you are and what you believe in eight sentences, or 130 words or less, could you do it? I know I would find it challenging. To write concisely is a skill and takes practice. Jesus seemed to be able to do this "off the cuff." The Beatitudes are only 130 words and yet they tell us everything we need to know about Jesus: who he is and what he is about. When you read the Beatitudes or hear them read, what do they say to you? Can you relate to any of them? And what do they tell us about Jesus?

Jesus doesn't begin this sermon with, "Welcome. Let me tell you something about myself and why I am here." No, he looks over the crowd and sees into the hearts of the people. He sees their burdens, their hopelessness, their powerlessness, their pain. Then he acknowledges their situation, blesses them, and makes promises to them. Jesus immediately connects with the people. These 130 words speak volumes to the human condition; and how God knows and cares for those who are experiencing the conditions listed in these eight verses: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Which condition(s), if any, can you relate to?

Before I delve into the first Beatitude, we need to know what the word, blessed, means. Blessed isn't a word that used often in the vernacular. However, it is used over 8000 times in the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures, "to bless" means to pay homage to another as to worship, or to humble oneself as a means of honoring the other. The Hebrew texts mention repeatedly that God blesses individual leaders and even all of humanity. God honors, pays homage to, and humbles God's self to humanity. In turn, the Psalms instruct us to bless God for the love, kindness, and forgiveness God offers to us. We are to bless God for all God does for us. God honors or blesses us and we are to honor or bless God as a way of thanking God. We sing, "God Bless America." We also need to remember, "America, bless God," or America, thank God for all God has done, is doing, and will be doing.

Jesus directs the word, "blessed," to those with whom he has identified their condition. He says in different ways that God remembers you, God favors you, God honors you, God is with you. He offers to those who are struggling and to those who society doesn't honor, a

promise that God is with them now. Jesus is God-with-us, the Emmanuel. This is the Good News incarnate, in the flesh! These words are uplifting. Jesus was talking to first century Jews who lived under the constant ruthlessness of Caesar. The Roman soldiers had the authority to take whatever they wanted from the peasants: food, money, animals, and even their children to be their slaves. They lived in constant fear for their families, their livelihood and their lives. So when Jesus looks into the eyes of the crowd and says, “Blessed are you...” he is touching them at the core of their suffering. His words have healing power and offer hope for his audience.

The first Beatitude or blessing is “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” There doesn’t seem to be any order to the list of Beatitudes, but this first one seems to be the one from which all the rest build. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Who are the poor in spirit that they are to be blessed? The spirits of the people who came to hear Jesus are about as low as they can be. They have been threatened, abused, and oppressed repeatedly by the occupying Romans. The Aramaic word that Jesus chose for the word, poor, has several different meanings. The first is the literal meaning of one without wealth, but it also meant one who has no power, no prestige, and no influence to defend one’s self against threats or insults. The people to whom Jesus was speaking were both without wealth and power. The word, also meant that in spite of these conditions, one can maintain one’s integrity by being humble and trusting in God. To be “poor in spirit” is to realize one’s utter helplessness and to put one’s whole trust in God. To be “poor in spirit” means to detach one’s self from things that cannot bring happiness or security and attach one’s self to God who can bring help, hope, and strength. William Barclay stated it this way, “The [one] who is poor in spirit is the [one] who has realized that things mean nothing and God means everything.”

We love our things. We are proud of our things. They bring us happiness, comfort, security, and status. And at the same time they are meaningless. We get rid of them to make room for more things or better things. Buying things and hoarding things can be addictive, too. Do you know what the first step is in any twelve step addiction recovery program? “We admit we were powerless over our addictions – that our lives have become unmanageable.” The first step is to admit that one is poor in spirit, that one is powerless over one’s life. However, this is countercultural. We are to achieve success, power, self-sufficiency, and have control over our lives. We spend lots of time, money, and energy achieving these. We are rich in things, rich in seeking our own wants/desires, and rich with pride. We push our relationship with God, if there is any, to the side and forget who has blessed us. And with these achievements, we may see ourselves as better than others. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus told a story that illustrates this. A Pharisee, a religious leader, and a tax collector, went to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee brags in his prayer of how righteous he is and in the same breath acknowledges that his gratefulness that he isn’t greedy, dishonest, and immoral like the tax collector. The tax collector prays, “Have mercy on me. I am a sinner.” The tax collector was aware of his spiritual poverty. The Pharisee was not (Luke 18:9-14). To be poor in spirit is to admit that at the end of the day, seeking success, power, self-sufficiency, and control is meaningless. To be poor in spirit is to admit that

we are powerless to our addictions of achieving success, power, self-sufficiency, and control. To be poor in spirit is to humble ourselves so that we can admit our weaknesses. Only then can we rely on God's help. To be poor in spirit is to say, "Have mercy on me, I am a sinner." There is a popular phrase which is not in the Bible, "God helps those who help themselves." When actually, God cannot help those who are self-sufficient. They have no need of God and will not allow God in. The poor in spirit are the "un-self-sufficient" ones. This is the heart of the Gospel. To follow Jesus we have to admit that we can't do life without divine assistance. To follow Jesus is to surrender everything in our lives to him. We declare not our independence, but our dependence on God. This is the first step for all who wish to take up the cross and follow Jesus. We have to trust in Jesus and be willing to obey his rule of Love. Jesus never asks us to do anything that he hasn't already done. Jesus' humbled himself to take on human form and was obedient to God to the point of submitting himself to death on the cross.

When we surrender our lives, we receive the Kingdom of Heaven now. This is the promise in the first Beatitude. The verb, "is," the present tense, links the human condition to the promise. We receive it now. When we think of kingdoms, we may think of kings, castles, and armies that protect them. This is not Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. To enter into God's kingdom, one doesn't need to have a passport or a visa. One just has to allow God to enter into one's life and be willing to obey God's rule of love. In God's Kingdom we live in the presence of God. We receive deliverance and forgiveness. We receive peace, healing, joy, and justice. The Kingdom of Heaven is shalom, the wholeness we receive through Christ. We pray for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We pray for the earth to live in peace and harmony. Jesus is saying in this first statement, "You who have hit rock bottom, I am here to be a blessing to you, to give you in the midst of your destituteness, all that God has to offer you." Jesus lifts up those the world has trampled and who admit their spiritual helplessness. Jesus begins the process of healing and restoration. This is who Jesus is and why he came to earth.

Admitting that one lives in spiritual poverty and depending on God is a process. We go back and forth from depending on God to depending on ourselves. This week I invite us to practice our dependence on and trust in God in every part of our lives. Lean on God. Pray for guidance. And then at the end of the day reflect on what happened. When did you depend on God and when did you depend on yourself? Then give thanks to God. God will bless you with peace and joy.

Reflection Questions: Has there been a time when life was unmanageable, and you needed to depend on God? How did God bless you? How much do you depend on yourself and how much do you depend on God? What would it look like to offer everything in your life to God?

Resources: *The Beatitudes and Lord's Prayer for Everyman* and *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1* by William Barclay; *The Spirituality of the Beatitudes* by Michael Crosby; *Foundations for Reconciliation: The Beatitudes* by Ray Ragsdale