

West Branch Friends Meeting  
February 19, 2017  
Sue McCracken, Pastor  
“Blessings at the End of the Rope”

Scripture: Matthew 5: 1-12

Every year during Teacher Appreciation Week in the schools where I worked, students were asked to fill out a little form to share how a certain teacher had really made an impact on their education. Teachers would then send the messages through school mail to the intended recipients, and as I passed them out to my teachers it was interesting to me to see the notes that came back from middle school and high school students who felt like their elementary teachers were their favorites. The reasons ranged from ‘she makes learning fun’ to ‘she loves kids’ and the best one (from my perspective!) was ‘she does lots of hands-on practical things to help us learn.’

If I asked each of you who your favorite teacher was when you were in school, I bet most of you could recall right off hand who it was and why. I have to admit I don’t necessarily have one favorite, but I did LOVE my five years in a country school where I had four different teachers and I just loved being in that school community where we all played together.

So where am I going with all this talk about teachers and teaching? I’m going to the master teacher – Jesus! His teachings were so revolutionary that they were passed down orally for at least half a century before they were written down. We in the education field could no doubt learn some things from the lessons Jesus taught. Lessons about living a life full of light and joy, often told in story form for easier understanding. So why was Jesus’ teaching so effective that huge crowds followed him wherever he went? I want to spend a few weeks digging into the familiar beatitudes that we read this morning, some of Jesus most important teachings, yet difficult to understand. I think there were a number of reasons why these teachings had such an impact. Here is a bit of history to help.

In his book, [The Beatitudes: A Path to a New Life](#), David Padfield gives us a glimpse of life in Judea in Jesus time. In the first century, Judea was filled with many problems: the land was occupied by a tyrannical military government, a world of absolute rulers, the opposite of democracy. It was also a world of persecution – the Jews were chattel for the Romans, with taxes consuming a third of their income. Racial prejudice was prevalent, and slavery was rampant with three slaves for every one free man.

In response to this situation, various Jewish sects – the Zealots, Sadducees, and Pharisees – had their own solutions: ‘don’t worry about your spiritual life, your hope is in the military might’. And ‘compromise is the only way to succeed – just be

cautious and negotiate the best deal you can'. And finally, 'live a clean, virtuous life and trust God to do the rest'.

So in the midst of this, a lowly Galilean Carpenter climbed the hills and walked the valleys and had compassion on these people and their suffering. Jesus begins teaching and his ways of living counter all these formerly preached so-called ways to survive with a totally different approach. He tells them they need to repent – which means make a life-altering change in your thinking. And he begins with these beatitudes, the first of which is ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”***

The first thing to note is that according to almost all the commentaries I looked up, a better translation of the Greek for 'blessed' is actually 'happy'! So I'm going to use that word from this point on in our discussion.

I must admit I never really fully understood what being poor in spirit meant for me – blessed OR happy! Like I often do when I need a different way of reading a verse, I look at it in The Message version. It says:

***“You're happy when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.”***

The world places a great emphasis on self-reliance and self-confidence. A humble politician is seldom elected because of being perceived as weak or lacking personality. I think our current president probably won over a lot of people because of his abundance of self-confidence that he continually reiterated in his speeches with the multitude of things he could accomplish.

But this is probably the opposite of being poor in spirit. I think Paul not doubt had it figured out because in I Corinthians 4:5 he says,

***“For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.”***

And to take it a step further, being poor in spirit doesn't mean we should be ashamed of our personal abilities or think we have to be living in poverty to be poor in spirit.

Gideon is probably a good Old Testament example of being poor in spirit when an angel told him to go and save Israel. His response, “How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” But he was willing to let God be his source of strength and victory was his.

Being poor in spirit is being humble enough to admit we need God and we need others, and giving up the idea that we always have to appear like we have our act together, especially spiritually.

I think there was a reason Jesus started the beatitudes with being poor in spirit. It reminds me of a Game Boy game my kids used to like called "Zelda". There was always some little key to unlocking the next level of the game. And I'm thinking this poor in spirit beatitude is probably the key to unlocking all the other guides to living.

Maybe we can also look at it from the aspect of a school play. My kids were in several of these high school productions, and there was always a main actor around which the play revolved. If you took the main actor out of the play, though, it just didn't make any sense.

The same goes for our spiritual lives when God needs to be the main actor. We often feel like we have to do it all, have all the answers, live a certain way, be the main actor in our own lives. Maybe Jesus could have said it like this: *"Happy are those who admit they can't do it all, for then they will begin to know the blessings and the joys of the Kingdom of God."*

Of course we all like to feel like we're in charge. Being the oldest child in my family, I am often the one lining up the family gatherings, deciding who brings what food, whose house we're meeting at, and so on. I was also in charge of two schools for sixteen years and placed a lot of stress on myself to be the one with all the answers. So this poor in spirit thing is kind of hard for me....hard to let go of wanting to be in charge of my lots of areas of my life, including my spiritual life.

Here's another version of this beatitude:

*"Happy are you when you've reached the absolute bottom point of the reservoir of your fiercely independent spirit, for then you will really be able to know God."*

Maybe, just maybe, when we can say, "I need help...I'm depending on you, God," we actually become stronger. One writer says being poor in spirit is to be vacant of self and waiting for God. It's acknowledging we are conscious of our absolute insufficiency, to be thankfully dependent on the life energy of the living God within us.

But then we need to consider the second half of the verse, too: the Kingdom of Heaven is the consequence of being poor in spirit. And this Kingdom of Heaven – of God – isn't referring to the pearly streets of heaven after death, but the kingdom that is here with us today. It includes within its ever-expanding circle, all the gracious souls of every race and age, injecting a breath of heaven into the stale air of the world. It is US – the childlike, the forgiving, the gentle, and pure.

In Jesus' day it was not the Pharisees who entered the kingdom by thanking God for all they had attained, or the Zealots who dreamed of establishing the kingdom by blood and sword. No, it was the publicans and the prostitutes, the rejects of human society, who knew they were so poor they had nothing to offer to God but to cry out

to God for mercy; THEY were the ones who knew how to be poor in spirit. Being poor in spirit allows God to turn us into God's own special people.

When we empty our ego and ourselves and live in total reliance on God for all things spiritual, we are able to be there for those who need light and love. We can respond with the joy and freedom of not worrying about being the best, the wealthiest, the prettiest (or handsomest), or the smartest. Because we recognize we are nothing without God's grace and God's gifts. It's truly life changing to live this way.

And a final rewrite of this beatitude might read:

*"Happy are those who are dependent upon God, who can acknowledge their inadequacies, and acknowledge their dependencies, for the Kingdom of Heaven will be theirs!"*

Being poor in spirit is the opposite of arrogant self-confidence that dominates and rides over other people and treats God as irrelevant. Put another way, being poor in spirit is the personal acknowledgment of our spiritual bankruptcy before God. It is the tax collector in Luke 18:13, standing in the temple before God and beating on his breast saying, ***"God, be merciful to me, the sinner"*** It is an honest confession that we are sinful and utterly without the moral virtues that we need to commend us to God.

But there are some practical things we can do to foster to this poor of spirit happiness. We can...

- Have an attitude of gratitude – daily make a list of things we are thankful for
- Be thankful to others – appreciate the people in our lives and thank them! I begun trying to make it a habit to thank the folks who have worked in the kitchen to prepare a funeral meal, for example. These folks- often women – give of their time and energy in love for the grieving family with often little compensation other than a thank you note from the family or funeral home.
- Be positive – we live in an often-negative news world. But we can monitor our thoughts and attitudes and not fall into the habit of always thinking the worst of people and those in the government.
- Perform acts of kindness – sounds easy, but sometimes we have to make a conscious effort to give of ourselves to others with a kind word or deed.
- Make a decision to be happy, realizing our very life is a gift from God – a God who lives within us and loves us unconditionally.

***Yes! Happy are the poor in spirit, for OURS is the kingdom of heaven!***

