

Epiphany 4A 2011

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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Matthew 5:1-12

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

My brother-in-law is a fairly committed Christian, but he is not afraid to ask questions. And his question to me was about this statement: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* So Jeff asked why would that be true? Shouldn't we aim for spiritual riches? Just as Jesus says somewhat later in this same sermon on the mount, "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.*" In other words, shouldn't the statement be something like this: "*Blessed are the poor, for they are spiritually rich*" ?

But Jesus means something more like humility. *Blessed are the humble, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* That's an initial answer to my brother-in-law's question. Except that *humility* is something we might do ourselves. We have some control over whether we are humble or proud. But *poverty in spirit* is a state of being that we cannot choose for ourselves. It simply is.

These statements of blessedness— sometimes called the Beatitudes— are generally statements of consolation. Consolation to people who are living what Paul today calls— in our second lesson— the truth of Christ crucified. A difficult way of living that is nevertheless the only true way of living. There is humbleness in what Paul is writing about— humility and poverty of spirit. *Consider your own call, brothers and sisters* – he's talking to a congregation like us— *not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*

The best scholars think that the Sermon on the Mount existed as a separate writing, a separate writing that was a guide to discipleship, a guide to the Christian life, and that Matthew simply inserted it into his gospel as a sermon. Now if you are old school, and you treasure the image of the crowds on the mountain with Jesus, that may upset you, but the fact that this is an older set of Jesus's teaching— a previously existing gospel, if you will— is exciting to many of us because it means we are looking at the oldest, unmodified, unedited, most accurate words of Jesus that the human family possesses. In this sermon on the mount— of if you believe Luke, the sermon on the plain— or if you believe me, teachings that may have been spoken in some other place entirely, but that have come down to us remarkably unharmed and untarnished by the major issues and concerns that affected and shaped so much else in the New Testament.

So this guide to discipleship, this Catechism, now chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's gospel, depicts a fairly difficult Christian life, albeit a life of great joy and great power. On one level, then, these blessings might be applied to the super-saints. You know: Mother Theresa, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* That has surely never happened to me. But it has happened to Peter and Paul and the other super-saints. *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* Super-saints. The late Pope John Paul II is about to be *beatified* by the Roman church, which means he will be rising into the super-saints. *Beatified. Beatitudes.* These things suggest the super-saints.

That's partly why I resist using the word *beatitudes*, which is a Latinate word unnecessarily imposed on this piece of scripture. Because although this is a handbook for the Christian life, on its deepest level, it speaks to universal truths, and not just principles for the super-saints. We are *all* poor in spirit. Much of the time we are oblivious to that poverty. Much of the time we are in denial. But in truth— in truth, we are much more fragile and powerless than we acknowledge. Our life can end arbitrarily. And the things we most care about— other people, our work, our abilities, our accomplishments— can equally be destroyed arbitrarily. We can be brought to a screeching halt in an instant and realize how poor in spirit we really are. What saddens me is how often people choose this moment to give up on God. When we are exposed in our fragility and our weakness, this is the moment that many people decide that life is unfair, and that God doesn't exist, or that if he exists, he isn't on their side. The moment of spiritual poverty is the moment when most people give up on God. Whereas, in truth, the moment of spiritual poverty is sometimes the first time the living God can gain entrance into our lives. We make so much noise that we can't hear God. And then when our noise is silenced, we can finally notice God and what He is up to. This is why spiritual poverty is blessed. That's the answer to my brother-in-law's question.

As Martin Luther lay dying, he wrote some thoughts on a piece of paper. The words are a meditation on how inadequate we are in the face of understanding the Bible. Luther's final written words: *We are beggars. This is true.* "We are beggars" in German. "This is true" in Latin. These are not words of despair. Martin Luther, super-saint, knew what it meant to be poor in spirit.

There was a famous 19th century theologian name Friedrich Schleiermacher. Take it from me, he is the greatest and best and smartest person that you've never heard of. He taught that all humans have a religious nature. And that the essence of that religious nature is our awareness of how dependent we are. And you may feel that sense of awe when you are at the Grand Canyon, or when you see great human talent at work, or when you hold a newborn baby. But Schleiermacher said that the Christian message and the Christian truth— of all the world's religions and philosophies— the Christian religion best grasped and best articulated this sense of dependence.

It all begins with spiritual poverty. God is perhaps shut out of our lives until the moment of spiritual poverty. Which is why this teaching on Christian living, this catechism, this Sermon on the Mount, these oldest and most authentic teachings of Jesus begin with this simple thesis statement: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Amen.*