

Close to the Heart of God: The poor in spirit
Matthew 4:23-5:3
First Presbyterian Church
January 14, 2018
Beatitudes Sermon Series

Introduction to the Reading

I read recently that there is difference between how a real artist and someone who simply “appreciates” art visits a museum. The art “appreciator” (that would be me) tries to see it all. I determine how much time I have... get a museum map... work out a route... and keep moving... because I want to see it all! A real artist, I learned, doesn’t even try to see it all... instead, she chooses three or four pieces and spends significant time with each of them... looking at each until its beauty passes through her eyes and makes a lasting impression on her soul. Whereas I, the “art appreciator,” end up seeing everything but experiencing nothing... she, the “real artist,” feels like she really knows those three or four paintings. It can be the same with reading the Bible. You can race through it... or in this case we can take all the Beatitudes together in one week... Or we can pause for some time on each one in hopes of letting it make a lasting impression on our souls.

Matthew 4:23-5:3

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So, his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

Watch out, my friends! There is a trap hidden within the Beatitudes. I know, I have fallen into it many times. It is as simple as it is subtle... and it’s perfectly positioned to snare folks like us.

“What trap?” you ask. It is the trap of believing... that in these twelve verses... Jesus is setting the conditions for blessing rather than blessing his hearers. Have you done what I do? When I hear the Beatitudes, I almost automatically hear Jesus laying down the terms of a contract under which I, his follower, might be blessed. He says, “Blessed are the pure in heart...” and I think “Am I pure enough in heart? I really should try to be purer in heart.” Or he says, “Blessed are the peacemakers...” and I think “Yes, I really should be more committed to making peace.” Have you done this, too? If so, I need you to promise me something... you need to promise me that throughout this series we will remind one other that in the Beatitudes Jesus is just plain blessing people. He’s not stating conditions or terms on that blessing. He’s just plain blessing people. Really!¹ And the point of listing some of the characteristics of those he is blessing - (poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart) is simply to say that God blesses those whom nobody else thinks are blessed... that God throws open the kingdom doors for those who least expect it.

Now as we begin, I want you to imagine with me the actual people to whom Jesus first spoke these words... those who were part of the crowd that Jesus saw before him on the hillside by the Sea of Galilee. We know his disciples were there... probably sitting at his feet closest to him... and that a crowd of others was gathered behind them. Matthew tells us that Jesus had spent the previous days traveling around the region teaching in its synagogues and healing people of their afflictions and illnesses... and that his fame had spread, and the numbers were growing. I mention this because it’s important not to separate these beatitudes from the real people who were standing right in front of him. Jesus is not offering generic religious blessings here... he is blessing those who are right there with him... he’s not listing nine characteristics of good people... he is blessing those who are right there with him.

Much has been made of the fact that the Gospel of Luke says Jesus blessed the “poor” (literally meaning the materially poor) ... and that Matthew says he blessed the “poor in spirit.” But the reality is – whether they are materially poor or not – Jesus is looking out on people to whom difficult things have happened... whose lives have come apart at the seams... who know all-too-well that they do not control their own futures... who have come to the end of their own resources... and who have thrown themselves on the mercy of God. “You will not be abandoned,” Jesus says. “In fact, you are already honored guests in the kingdom I am bringing.² They are those who cannot find work to support their families and are ostracized because of where they came from. They are children who are not well taken care of and older persons who are cast aside and forgotten. They are those who are chronically sick and in pain... those whose bodies are disabled or whose minds are devoured by mental illness. They are those whose lives have come apart due to no fault of their own... and those who have tried hard to beat their addiction but can’t. They are those who have suffered too many devastating losses and are about to give up. In other words, they are those who experience poverty in its many, many forms... and out of their need... out of their powerlessness to control... because of their inability to sustain hope and purpose, they throw themselves on the mercy of God... falling before God as “spiritual beggars”. These, Jesus says, God will not abandon. For they have already been given, through the presence of Christ, they have already been given the kingdom of heaven.

¹ David Lose, *God Bless you*, at workingpreacher.org, January 23, 2011.

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, p. 48-49

It's crazy, I know. It's all upside-down and inside-out. And it flies in the face of everything we are taught. We're taught early on that blessing is for those who have robust egos and a strong sense of self-worth. Blessing is for those who are born into the right family and live in the right neighborhoods and go to the right schools and excel in the right fields and are well-funded in retirement. Yet, from Old Testament times "poor in spirit" has been a primary mark of the people of God.³ Humility has been a primary mark of the people of God. God's people know the limits of our knowledge... we acknowledge the restrictions on our power and our abilities... and like Isaiah we confess that when we come "face-to-face" with our holy God, we fall far short. We know our place – it is an honored place, to be sure... a place just below the angels, the psalmist says ... yet we are not God... and we are nothing without God. And according to Jesus, the first way you will know someone is near to the heart of God is by their humility... their need... their awareness of what they don't have and need God for... their poverty of spirit. Otherwise, as Frederick Buechner writes, you will live our lives like a big clenched fist. The clenched fist can do many things: it can work, hang on to things, impress, even fight. But "the one thing a clenched fist cannot do is accept, even from the good God himself, a helping hand."⁴ It is only the poor in spirit who can have anything, because they are the ones who know how to receive gifts. For them, everything is a gift.⁵ And that is what it means to be blessed.

³ M. Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume VIII*, p. 178.

⁴ I am quite sure this is Frederick Buechner but cannot locate the citation.

⁵ Simon Tugwell, *The Beatitudes: Soundings in Christian Traditions*