

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 17, 2013, First Sunday in Lent, dedicated to the blessed memory of Ruth Reeves, who entered eternal life one day short of her 88th birthday, and always to the glory of God!

“Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit” **Matthew 5:3**

(Part II of VIII in the Sermon Series “Blessed Are You”)

Having explored the overall meaning of the Beatitudes or “blessings” of Jesus in Matthew 5:1-12 on Ash Wednesday, a sermon which was emailed to everyone (if you didn’t receive it, email me, it is online and printed as well), today we come to our second part of our sermon series on the Beatitudes. It is: “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Please join me in prayer....

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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When Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, he was speaking to the 99% in the “Occupy Movement” of his time. While there may have been a sprinkling of wealthy elites in the crowd, the vast majority of people present were poor. Crushed by a cruel system of Roman taxation that had hit the fishing community around the Sea of Galilee particularly hard, people were living off the land, clustered in tiny hamlets, with little food, no health care and little to no opportunities to get ahead.

They were barely eking out a living. As Susan Thistlethwaite said in her teaching last week, “*Why do think there were so many people standing around to hear him instead of out on the lake fishing? Their boats were grounded with holes in them and their nets were old and torn!*”

To this crowd, Jesus proclaims in the opening Beatitude of Luke’s Gospel, “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*” (6:20). Matthew leads with “poor in spirit” (to which I will return in a moment). In both gospels, the Greek word for “poor” is “*ptochoi*,” which means they were low in funds, but also miserable, oppressed and humiliated. Matthew, in speaking to a mostly Jewish crowd in his gospel, would have known the Hebrew understanding of the human person does not separate body and spirit. The Hebrews saw the totality of the human condition. The Hebrew mentality neither spiritualized nor materialized poverty or the person in poverty – there would always be a unity of the two.

Poverty was awful in Jesus’ time and it is awful today. So the question seems clear: What is “*blessed*” about poverty and being poor – body, mind or spirit?

Poverty is not a blessing if you are the one who is poor. We cannot idealize the poor and poverty as a condition for salvation. Someone caught in poverty’s net does not eat well, does not sleep well, often cannot find a place to call home or is on the edge of losing the place she does call home. She can’t find work for the day let alone longer than a day, and certainly doesn’t have access to a medical home where daily needs for health care can be addressed and disease can be prevented. Resources for daily living are slim to none.

On the surface and below the surface, there is nothing beautiful and blessed about poverty. In his book, *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner speaks of his childhood. Growing up in the aftermath of his father’s suicide was hard for Frederick and his family– mentally and often economically. Poverty was never far from them. He writes that our attempt to flee the grip of poverty can often barricade us from receiving the grace of God. “*We 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” (F. Buechner, The Sacred Journey, Harper and Row, NY, NY, 1982, p. 46).

If we are not in poverty, with open hands, we must approach those who have clenched fists. If we are in poverty, we must open our clenched fists and allow our sisters and brothers who seek to walk with us and assist us on the sacred journey called “LIFE.” All of us – with open hands - must always be about the work of relieving the conditions of the poor and fighting for justice for the poor. The New Great Depression in America is devastating and real. We must do everything in our power to alleviate the pain and devastation of these times. We must not get caught up in the words of this beatitude, but rather in its spirit!

But believe me – this is not easy work! Let me give an example. I have been chairing the Central Ohio Coalition for Medicaid Expansion in all of Ohio beginning in 2014. It is the most amazing coalition of business, governmental and social justice advocates of which I have ever been apart. We are teamed with partners across the state calling on the Ohio Legislature to accept this plan. As you may know, the national health care act (affectionately called Obamacare) offers all the states 100% coverage for new people coming into Medicaid beginning 1/1/14. This will continue for three years, at which point the plan will cover 90% of those who come in from 2018 to 2021. This will immediately allow between 500,000 and 700,000 medically-fragile and uninsured Ohioans to have medical care and coverage. It will create jobs for the medical community and health care for the poor.

It is estimated in a study by Ohio State University that hundreds of millions of dollars and over 10,000 jobs will be created by this plan alone in Ohio. The hospitals are behind this, health-care advocates are behind this, the *Columbus Dispatch* has endorsed this, Governor Kasich and his administration is behind it and has it squarely in his state budget plans (kudos to John Kasich!). But the legislature is not sure if they support this because

they don't like "Obama and his Obamacare." So what could make a difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of Ohioans is passed over because it doesn't fit into a certain political philosophical box? Really? Those who have the ability to help turn away when given the chance. It is as though they don't even see the poor. They are invisible to them! Do you see why it is so hard to offer real care for real poor people?

So, let's return to the "poor" or "poor in spirit."

In his book, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Clarence Jordan, farmer and founder of Koinonia Farms (which was place from which Habitat for Humanity was born), preaching on the question of whether Jesus meant spiritual poverty or monetary poverty, says:

"If you have a lot of money you will say, spiritual poverty. If you have little or no money you will say physical poverty. The rich will thank God for Matthew. The poor will thank God for Luke. Who's right? Chances are neither one, for it is exactly this attitude of self-praise and self-justification and self-satisfaction that robs people of their sense of great need for the Kingdom and its blessings. When one says, 'I don't need to be poor in things; I'm poor in spirit,' and another says, 'I don't need to be poor in spirit I am poor in things' both are justifying themselves as they saying in unison, 'I don't need.' With that cry on his lips, no man can repent." (C. Jordan, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Judson Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1952, p. 20).

Every single one of us – no matter what our lot in life – has some poverty in our spirits. We may be struggling with anger at God or others – with clenched fists toward God or others. We may be struggling with drug and alcohol addictions or co-dependency in relation to an addicted loved one. We may be struggling to get out of vicious cycles of violence or neglect. We may be drowning in narcissism where we only see ourselves and no one else. As Jordan says, it is these attitudes of self-praise and self-justification and self-satisfaction that rob us of openness to others and our acknowledgment of our great need for the Kingdom of God and its blessings. And God's kingdom is not far off.

What is the kingdom of heaven? The answer is unfolded in the Beatitudes themselves and in the rest of Jesus' teachings and life. All of the Beatitudes define the Kingdom. Leonhard Goppelt puts it this way: *"As a single ray of light passing through a prism is broken into the colourful spectrum of the rainbow, so too what the Kingdom brings finds colourful development in the promises of the Beatitudes."* (Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament, Volume 1*, Eerdmanns Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 68).

The Kingdom of God is where the poor in spirit are. The kingdom is evidenced in those who are mourning, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, acting mercifully, and working for peace with justice. In a nutshell, The kingdom of God is wherever Jesus is. Again, Frederick Buechner, reflecting now on the Kingdom of God, writes:

"If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know that the Kingdom of God in the sense of holiness, goodness, beauty is as close as breathing and crying out to be born both within ourselves and our world; we would know that the Kingdom of God is what we all of us hunger for above all other things even when we don't know its name or realize that it's what we're starving to death for."

"The Kingdom of God is where our best dreams come from and our truest prayers. We glimpse it at the moments when we find ourselves being better than we are and wiser than we know. We catch sight of it when at some moment of crisis; a strength seems to come to us that is greater than our own strength. The Kingdom of God is where we belong. It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all of us homesick for it." (F. Buechner, *The Clowns in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, CA., 1992, p. 152).

Are you homesick? Is there something missing in your spirit and your spirituality that is hungering for God? Is there a sadness in your spirit which most certainly is poor?

In all of this and the unnamed realities of our lives that are secretly veiled on these our “sacred journeys,” God is watching and waiting, God is seeking to bless us. God wants us to be happy. God wants God’s kingdom to be ours. But we have meet God halfway on the journey to happiness. As Seneca writes in the heart of his wisdom: *“There are but two ways to make people happy: you add to their possessions or you subtract from their desires and adding to possessions, will in the long run, not make you happy.”*

Whether you are “poor” or “poor in spirit,” open your clenched fist. Open your heart. Open your eyes to see and your ears to hear and your wits to understand. The Kingdom of God will be found in your open hands and heart.

As Matthew 5:3 puts it: *“Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.”* Yours can also be the Kingdom of God as you open yourself to the poverty found in your own spirit. Amen.

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