

Down but Not Out

Philippians 2:5-11

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 5:1-3; 26:39-46 Ash Wednesday Feb. 18, 2015

Here it is, Ash Wednesday. It's a time when we begin Lent: a season of discipline, a season of reflection, a time to understand better who we are, and to understand our relationship with God. It's a time to say, we're not gods. A few weeks ago, I heard a pastor say that the best thing she learned in seminary was on her first day, in orientation. One of the professors simply said, "you'll do all right, if you remember that God is God, and you're not."

The Psalmist tells us that we're just frail mortals, like the wild flowers that bloom in the morning and shrivel up in the afternoon heat. So it works really well to look at the first Beatitude on Ash Wednesday. The CEB says, "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs." I still like the older translation, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." But does that mean that God wants us to go around with long faces, that we think that we're worthless, or that depression is a virtue?

To figure out what it means to be poor in spirit, and what it means to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven, we should look at still other translations. NEB: How blest are those who know that they are poor.

Good News: Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor.

J.B. Phillips: How happy are the humble minded.

CEV: God blesses those people who depend only on God. They belong to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Message: You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

So we can see that it's a matter of "who do you trust?" Do we rely on God more than we rely on wealth or economic security? Do we realize that it isn't our financial bottom line, our stock portfolio, that determines our real worth? It's trusting God completely and taking God more seriously than we take ourselves. It's realizing that our true worth, our true value, our true humanity, is a gift from God, and that God loves us all infinitely. We're each God's favorite child.

One time at a class reunion, students were remembering a beloved teacher who had passed away. Joan said, "I've never told anybody this, but Mrs. Wilson whispered to me one day that I was her favorite student." Bob, the class cutup, said, "That's funny, she told me that in spite of my antics, I was her favorite student." It turned out that everybody at the table had been given that same blessing. God is like Mrs. Wilson. We are all God's favorite children, we are all blessed. But the people described in the Beatitudes are the most favored by God, because they are in tune with what God wants of us all.

To be poor in spirit basically means not to be full of ourselves, but to be dependent upon God. It means not setting ourselves above others, nor

trying to do it all, but to realize that it is God who is important, and not us. Remember the old bumper stickers that said "God is my co-pilot?" I saw another one that said, "If God is your co-pilot, switch seats." Jim Forest, in his book *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*, puts it in more depth when he says, "Without poverty of spirit, none of us can begin to follow Christ. What does poverty of spirit mean? It is my awareness that I cannot save myself, that I am defenseless, that neither money nor power will spare me from suffering and death. It is my awareness that I desperately need God's help and mercy. It is stepping away from the rule of fear in one's life, fear being the great force that restrains us from acts of love. Being poor in spirit means becoming free of the myth that possessing many things will make me a happier person. It is an attitude expressed in a French proverb: "When you die, you carry in your clutched hand only that which you have given away." (unquote)¹ To me this says that being poor in spirit doesn't mean hating ourselves or having a poor self-image, rather it means that we don't try to make ourselves God; we let God be God.

One thing that I'll be emphasizing in this whole series about the Beatitudes is that Jesus not only spoke the beatitudes, he lived them. Although he was Lord, he didn't lord it over others. He accepted as brothers and sisters people that others would call the scum of the earth. "He eats and drinks with sinners," his critics said. He became an accepting friend of the friendless. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he could have said, "God, I really don't want to die. There's still so much to do. I'm too good a person to be treated in such an awful way." Instead, he said, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass before me. But not my will, but thine be done."

Is it any wonder that Paul wrote those words we heard earlier, about Christ being willing to set aside his glory to become a human being? Christ went from being a heavenly king to being like a slave. "When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Again, Christ, who was spiritually rich, became spiritually poor, for our sake.

In a me-first, self-absorbed, do what it takes to get ahead culture, it's almost anti-American to say, "No, I'm not number one. God is. It is God's will and God's love that rule my life. And I'm going to live as if I really believe it." When we discover that we're on God's team, we can put our pride and arrogance behind us. As we realize our own spiritual poverty, then we can share in the spiritual richness that God offers us. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

¹ Jim Forest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*. Orbis Press, 1999.