

Lenten Reflection by Rev. Bette Duff

Wednesday, March 25, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church in Madison Wisconsin

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5.3

I used to think that this first beatitude was meant to help us through hard times when our spirits were low. In many ways, I still believe that to be true. We can always be sure that God reaches out to comfort us when we need help.

However, as I read more about the first beatitude, I found that it might have had additional meanings for those group of followers who gathered to listen to Jesus.

When they heard Jesus speak of being “poor in spirit” , they would recognize that the word “poor” in their culture often carried the idea of being completely destitute and being completely dependent on someone or something other than oneself. In that sense to consider yourself “poor in spirit” might be a reminder that you should be humble and realize that you need others to get along. The beatitude was a call to face the world with humility.

In the Greek culture that surrounded Jesus and the disciples, to be rich in spirit was the highest goal of the pious. To be rich in spirit was the source of spiritual joy and blessedness. And yet, in this first beatitude, Jesus is saying that blessedness is to be achieved through poverty in spirit.

Some who have studied the beatitude believe that when Jesus tells his followers to be “poor in spirit”, he is pointing out the arrogance and hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, people he considered to be anything but “poor in spirit.”

Martin Luther points out that in this first beatitude, Jesus contradicts the common idea at the time, that being rich shows that you are blessed by God. For Luther to be “poor in spirit” meant not to attach your heart to temporal things and to be humble.

My favorite explanation of what humility looks like was expressed by one writer in this way:

To be “poor in spirit” does not mean what one has, but what one is. A person can easily profess with their mouth that they are humble, but in reality they can be conceited, and as stubborn as a mule.

In the second part of the beatitude, Jesus tells the disciples that if they are “poor in spirit” that the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. I often wonder about the Kingdom of Heaven. In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

I believe that glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven can be experienced here on earth. I found it unexpectedly this past year as I watched the energy of the young people and the adults who worked together to organize the annual Trash and Treasure Sale. They worked hard and enjoyed themselves. There was a spirit of laughter and cooperation that I have always found in the event over the past 26 years. However, it was only after studying this beatitude that I recognized it as an example where glimpses of a joyous Kingdom of Heaven on earth could be found. Volunteers worked together to organize an event that helped themselves as well as others.

I’m sure that in your life you also have had similar glances of the Kingdom of Heaven in unexpected places.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Thanks be to God

Amen