

I once made the mistake of asking an adult Sunday School class what their favorite part of the worship service was. There were about 3 smarty pants that said in unison, “The Benediction.” Everyone broke into laughter, but a woman who had answered spoke up to explain her answer. She said, “I don’t like the benediction because it’s when the service is over. The benediction reminds me of God’s promise to be with me and to bless my life in every situation, no matter how bad it looks.” The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 may have been where she first got that idea.

Biblical scholars agree that the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6 & 7) is a collection of Jesus’ teachings given over a period of time. Matthew gathered and edited these teachings. It is good to remember that the Beatitudes are not requirements and rewards for Christian living. Rather, they are the result of a life lived to the fullest by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The Beatitudes describe the condition of a person in a right relationship with God. The word “blessed” is often translated with the word “happy.” It is much more than what the secular world considers happiness—possessions, success, satisfaction or peace. The blessed person lives in favor with God and fellow humans. I’ve always liked the description of happiness from Denis Waitley, a Robert Schuller-type of speaker and author. He once said: “Happiness cannot be traveled to, owned, earned, worn or consumed. Happiness is the spiritual experience of living every minute with love, grace, and gratitude.”

Though the Beatitudes are applicable to the present, their promises look to the future for fulfillment. The Beatitudes are God-oriented and kingdom of heaven focused. Our blessed estate does not depend on our physical well-being for its fulfillment. It is conceivable a Christian can be perfectly miserable on earth and yet be blessed.

One of the most intriguing phrases from the Beatitudes is in the very first line: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*” Luke omits “in spirit” whereas Matthew includes it. Certainly Matthew is not neglecting people who are physically poor. Poor people are not necessarily blessed by virtue of being poor. The economically poor can be godly or godless. Nor does “*poor in spirit,*” mean a lack of spirit. Rather, the phrase describes a state of being which we might call humility, unworthiness, a dependence on God for the fulfillment of needs.

The Beatitudes describe God’s people and tell what makes them blessed and happy. To be a blessed person is to be a happy person regardless of external circumstances. It is not an off-and-on experience, but a condition that continuously prevails as long as the habit is maintained—the habit of practicing a certain spiritual lifestyle. All humans experience the need for happiness. Are Christians happier than non-Christians? I don’t think that is really what Jesus is saying. But if we are to form the habit of happiness, how are we to do it?

1) By hungering for righteousness according to v. 6. 2) By showing mercy according to v. 7. 3) By making peace according to v. 11. 4) By suffering for Jesus according to v. 11. I know what you’re thinking right now. “I was with you ‘til the last one. Suffering for Jesus, really? Do you have to add that one?”

If you want to be blessed and happy keep all these things in mind. Who doesn't need God's blessing? In our congregation there are people with numerous problems, questions, and needs. It is inconceivable to me that there is even one person here today who does not need God's favor. In fact, it could probably be said that most every person in church today is here to receive the blessing of God. It is obvious that not all people are blessed, though they may need God's blessing. Why aren't they? Is it God's unwillingness or our lack of receptivity?

The answer is in the Beatitudes. God's blessing comes to those who are spiritually needy; and to those who strive to practice Christian virtues; and to those who suffer for the cause of Christ.

*And he began to teach them. He said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). The New English Bible helpfully translates verse 3 in this way: "How blest are those who know their need of God." So I ask you: When do we most quickly turn to God? When we are suffering; when we have a desperate need. I've also noticed that what the Bible says about being poor is sometimes controversial. This verse and something else Jesus said about the poor in Matthew 26:11 contribute to the controversy: "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."*

In biblical tradition, the poor and those on the margins of society receive God's special care. Nowhere does God tell his people to let someone else watch out for the poor and marginalized. Nor does God tell the poor to be patient, to endure, to be confident. Nowhere does God say, "Forget about your empty stomachs. Forget about your lack of health insurance. Forget about your hungry kids and your homelessness. Are your unemployment benefits running out? Go get a job. In heaven, you'll have all you need and more." No.

The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are clear: God is with the poor. God is against those who keep the poor in poverty. God is against oppressors and in favor of the oppressed. God calls for justice for the poor right here and right now. And perhaps most significantly, God calls on us to participate in offering that justice.

The Gospel narrative mirrors this call to justice and righteousness in the person and work of Jesus. Jesus, who could have been born in a palace, is born in a stable. Jesus, who could have been birthed by a queen, is birthed by an unknown teenager. Jesus, who could have hung out with the high and mighty, prefers the company of the downtrodden and the outcast. Jesus, who possesses all wisdom and power, allows himself to be emptied of wisdom and power and dies on the cross.

We are accustomed to hearing the Beatitudes expressed passively: *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted...Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy...Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."* "Blessed" is the translation of a Greek word that is itself a translation from Jesus' own language of Aramaic. The original Aramaic word is not passive at all. Instead, it means to set oneself on the right way for the right goal; to turn around, repent; to become straight or righteous.

When I understand Jesus' words in their Aramaic context, I see the Beatitudes in a new light. I can hear Jesus saying, "Get up and do something. Get your hands dirty to help build a human society for human beings made in the image of God. Imitate the extravagant generosity of God in your relationships with all

people.” Christian faith is not passive, but active; it is energetic, alive, giving. Christian faith calls us out of ourselves—and no one promises it will be easy.

In Jesus, wealth and poverty, power and suffering clash—or maybe cross each other. I am convinced that these things clash or cross in us as well. Few of us middle-class folks need to go back very far in our own lives, or the lives of our parents and grandparents, to know what being poor is like.

An area of southwestern New Hampshire that is the adopted home of many novelists and writers is, in many ways, a throwback to an earlier time. As it has been for centuries, much of the land area remains forest-covered. Small and medium-sized towns punctuate the state highways and backroads. A by-product of the settlement patterns is that people tend to know more about one another than may at times be comfortable. Folks speak their minds and value the independence that the state’s motto, “Live free or die,” represents.

We’re “not from ’round here” is usually what transplants say. A pastor friend who lives there tells me, “We have learned local history and lore primarily by listening and asking judicious (and never invasive) questions. As we have become part of the community, living here full-time and working within a congregation, we have gradually been admitted into family circles through rites of passage and times of crisis. We have heard some amazing stories and have come to know and to love some very remarkable people.

Hard times today elicit the telling of stories about other times when, “Things were a lot worse ’round here than they are now.” The Great Depression is part of most families’ oral histories. A phrase that often comes up in relating those experiences is, “*We never knew we were poor.*”

My friend says, “We’ve heard stories of kids sleeping three and four to a bed during the winter to keep warm, because there wasn’t enough firewood to burn in the stove through the night, then waking up to find ice on the inside of the window panes. Truck gardening, home canning, small game and deer hunting, keeping chickens, cows, and pigs, and baking from scratch helped lots of families get by. Worn-out clothes were saved to make quilt squares. Neighbors kept track of neighbors. “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without” was a good adage to live by.

The church in the Depression was the extension of families and neighbors. Everybody worked; everybody helped. “We tried to do what Jesus would want us to do. Nobody ever went hungry, and we never knew we were doing without,” was the way one of our now-departed saints described the way things worked. Folks just did what needed to be done, and in that approach to ministry, everyone was valued, everyone was cared for, and *no one knew they were poor*. Not a bad way to be.”

Whether we’re rich or poor, Jesus calls us to open ourselves, to empty ourselves, to free ourselves from whatever possessions or attitudes or identities may encumber us, in order that we might be open and empty before God. How *happy* are those who give up their trust in themselves and learn to trust God instead! If we allow ourselves to be remade by God, our attitudes, which often distinguish between rich and poor, the “haves” and the “have-nots,” might actually soften. I’m sure that some of us here today don’t even know that we are poor—poor in spirit, that is.

But we can become agents of God's love if we get up, go ahead, move beyond ourselves, and place our needy lives in the hands of the Savior who makes all things possible.

This is how to be blessed and happy. Amen.