

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany- January 28, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 71:1-6 & Matthew 5:1-3

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

Over the past couple Sundays in this Epiphany season 2007 we've highlighted the gospel image of Jesus as our Teacher. We've remembered our commitment to follow him so closely and learn from him so completely that we'll be covered by his dust, the dust of our Rabbi. Last week we began focusing on the content of his teaching. In Mark's gospel, we saw that Jesus begins by proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" (1:14-15).

The coming of God's reign and the need to embrace it in repentance are at the heart of Jesus' teaching. In his understanding, the Kingdom of the God whom he knows intends the greatest blessing for all, and not just for some. As we saw last Sunday, his emphasis on that fact came as an unwelcome jolt to many of his contemporaries. We reflected, too, on how often it can give us that same sort of whack.

As the gospels continue to unfold Jesus' Kingdom teaching, they keep delivering similarly unsettling hits. Matthew in his chapters 5-7 records the famous Sermon on the Mount, which gives us Jesus' most important elaboration of his Kingdom instruction. Today we'll start at that Sermon's beginning and see what kind of jolt it might have in store.

"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" (5:1-3). Jesus begins his sermon with his "beatitudes". Through them, he highlights particular kinds of people that the coming of God's kingdom blesses.

The "poor in spirit" are followed by seven others- "those who mourn", "the meek", "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness", "the merciful", "the pure in heart", "the peacemakers", and "those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake". Today we concentrate on the "poor in spirit" and ask, "Who are they?"

Maybe you've seen this old *Peanuts* cartoon. Lucy's at her familiar booth from which she dispenses her 5-cent psychological advice. Charlie Brown has stopped by to hear what she has to say. Lucy has her look of confident, worldly wisdom on her face as she tells him, "Life is like a deck chair, Charlie. On the cruise ship of life, some people place their deck chair at the rear of the ship so they can see where they've been. Others place their deck chair at the front of the ship so they can see where they're going."

Charlie has his familiar look of puzzlement on his face as Lucy asks him, "Well, Charlie, which way is your deck chair facing?" Charlie replies, "I can't even get my deck chair unfolded."

The character of Charlie Brown points us in the direction of "the poor in spirit" Jesus has in mind with his first beatitude. Charlie is not one of those folks who always appears to be on top of things. He's frequently befuddled, confused, and uncertain instead- *and he knows it*. He's aware of his steady need for help and guidance and, above all, doesn't pretend otherwise.

That's the sense in which he helps us see who Jesus means by "the poor in spirit". They are those who know that, in spite of what any appearances might suggest, they are not in charge. They are not on top or in control. They are not self-made. They're aware instead of their constant need for God. They feel their utter dependence upon their Maker and their interdependence with others through whom God provides for their needs.

Are those the kind of people we usually think of as "blessed"? Most people in Jesus' day did not, which means that his first beatitude came as another jolt to them. In Jesus' day, most people, and especially leaders like the Pharisees, saw God's blessing in terms of things like material

prosperity, fine reputation, happy family life, and good friends. They saw the *absence* of such things as a sign that a person was in God's *disfavor*.

I suspect it's not that much different for us today. Is somebody like Charlie Brown the first person we think of when we consider who is richly "blessed"? Or to bring the question closer to home, "When do we usually think of ourselves as particularly 'blessed'?"

Isn't it when we feel that our family life is pleasant and smooth or our friends are loyal and close or our neighborhood is congenial and hassle-free or our work is satisfying and well-paid or our health is steady and strong, or our leisure time is ample and fun? Isn't there also something in us that's ready to think that if things aren't like that in a person's life, then it means that God somehow must be *displeased* with them?

Nevertheless, Jesus insists that "the poor in spirit" are those who first and foremost are blessed in the coming of God's Kingdom. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he says. That *doesn't* mean that Jesus thinks the "good things in life" I've just mentioned are *not* blessings from God. He knows that they certainly are, BUT . . . *only if we receive them as such*.

If we claim them instead as things *we* have *achieved*, as things *we* *deserve* because *we* have *earned* them, then they become curses instead of blessings. They serve then to make us self-centered rather than God-centered and move us further away from God and God's reign rather than closer. Jesus' first beatitude warns us against that severe spiritual danger, and since it's such an easy trap to fall into it's crucial that Jesus' warning against it give us a serious jolt, too.

How readily do we slip into the conviction that the good things we have in our lives are the result of our own efforts? How often do we congratulate ourselves with the feeling that "Nobody ever gave me anything; everything I've got came from the sweat of my own brow?"

Unfortunately, self-delusion of that kind is also often accompanied by a sense that my worth as a human being *depends* on my possession of such things. I count, I matter, I am somebody because I have lots of money, or an attractive family, or a socially prestigious position, or a successful career, or whatever other external standard I've come to think is the real judge of a person's value. Sadly, the flip side of this is another false feeling, this time of a presumed superiority over others who don't measure up to those standards as well as I do. I might not allow myself to say it out loud, but inside I *do* feel that I'm better than they are.

But to be "poor in spirit" is to be free of all of such delusions. Poor in spirit, we know that our ultimate worth and the worth of everyone else doesn't depend in the least on anything we have or have not achieved or earned or deserved. Poor in spirit, we understand that in God's eyes each of us actually stands completely naked- naked with absolutely nothing to commend or to condemn us. And yet, hallelujah, thank God, God's reign comes to each of us poor and naked ones to give us the blessed assurance that we are ultimately and equally worthy simply because God has made us, simply because God loves each of us as God's own precious child.

This is such a sweet relief for us because it means we can finally let go of our pretenses. We all have our weaknesses, vulnerabilities, messes and failures. If we think we have to keep up our sense of self-worth at least through the appearance of achievement and success, then we try to hide the less flattering parts of our lives. We try to hide them from each other, from ourselves, and from God. It's all so exhausting and useless, but it's also impossible to let go of if we think our very worth is riding on it.

Writer Peter Senge was on a canoe trip up in Maine with some friends. At one point they came upon a small dam in the river. They put ashore to portage around it when they saw a rafting group come up behind them. One of its members tried to take his raft over the dam rather than carry around it. But when he did, the raft overturned and dumped him into the freezing water.

Unable to reach him, everyone watched in horror as he struggled desperately to swim downstream against the backwash at the base of the dam. He struggled only a few minutes before he collapsed from hypothermia. Immediately, his body was sucked down into the water. A few seconds later it popped up again ten yards downstream. At that point it was free of the maelstrom at the base of the dam, but by then it was too late.

The young man had died as a result of his struggle against the currents at the surface of the dam's base. He had thought his survival depended on that struggle, but he was wrong. Instead, it depended on his letting go of that false struggle so he could join with the river's true current deeper below. If he had dived into it, he'd have been carried further downstream to new life.

I suggest to you this morning that it's the same in our struggles for self-worth. If we falsely battle for it in the surface currents of achievement and success, we end up spiritually exhausted, frozen, and dead- drowned in all our futile efforts to maintain pretense. But if we allow ourselves to dive deeper, joining up with the full truth of our condition, facing up in poverty of spirit to our weaknesses, vulnerabilities, messes, and failures, too, then the Kingdom of God comes along and carries us to new and blessed life.

It's striking how clearly Twelve-Step programs like AA recognize this and make it central to their work. The Twelve Steps sound a clarion call for all of us to be "poor in spirit". We can see this plainly in the way they start. Step One: I admit my life has been taken over by an addiction or problem I'm powerless against. I can't pretend any more that I'm in charge or in control. Steps Two and Three: I recognize that only a Higher Power can set me free and I get ready to submit myself to that Power's care. Steps Four and Five: I start doing so by making "a searching moral inventory of myself and by admitting to God, myself, and another human being the exact nature of my wrongs."

Steps Four and Five call for the hottest and heaviest action in being "poor in spirit". They call us to get down to the nitty-gritty in facing up to our weaknesses, vulnerabilities, messes, and failures. They take us into the basements of our hearts and lives to shine a flashlight on the cobwebs and creepy crawlers that usually stay hidden there. If we try to hang on to any sense of self-worth by portraying ourselves mainly as high achievers or big successes, we have an awful time with Steps Four and Five. They keep pressuring us to let go of every pretense.

Christian businessman, Keith Miller, tells of his experience with Step Five. He's a Protestant, but he had arranged to meet hundreds of miles away from his home with a Roman Catholic priest who would hear his confession. Miller made a long list of specific sins he had committed, of particular people he had done wrong, and of the various flaws that marked his character. He read the whole, heavy list to the priest without once looking up at him.

When Miller had finished, he just sat with his head in his hands and waited for the priest to say something. For a long time, the priest said nothing at all. Eventually, Miller forced himself to raise his head. When he did, he saw that the priest was crying. The priest finally spoke, "My God, Keith, that's my list, too."

Two men, united in their poverty of spirit, had the blessing of God's Kingdom come upon them. It can be the same for all of us together because who else are we? We're followers of Jesus, too, and we learn from him that we are poor in spirit. Embracing that hard but beautiful truth, we discover like Keith Miller and his priest, and just as Jesus said, that "The kingdom of heaven is ours." Amen.