

Join with me in prayer: “How blest are those who know their need of God”.¹ Amen.

I begin by offering a reflection from David Brooks, a more conservative editorialist for the New York Times and regular political pundit on PBS & NPR; two of the best institutions found from the land of my birth. This excerpt appeared in a recent book of his which I had a chance to read while on Sabbatical. It is a compelling reflection for countries in the midst of national celebrations, and not unrelated to Beatitude One-- the Poor in Spirit.

[N]one of us should ever wish to go back to the culture of the mid-twentieth century. It was a more racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic culture. Most of us would not have had the opportunities we enjoy if we had lived back then. It was also a more boring culture, with bland food and homogenous living arrangements. It was an emotionally cold culture....

But it did occur to me that there was perhaps a strain of humility that was more common then than now, that there was a moral ecology, stretching back centuries but less prominent now, encouraging people to be more skeptical of their desires, more aware of their own weaknesses, more intent on combating the flaws in their own natures and turning weakness into strength. People in this tradition, I thought, are less likely to feel that every thought, feeling, and achievement should be immediately shared with the world at large... There was stronger social sanction against...blowing your own trumpet, getting above yourself, being too big for your britches....

As I looked around the popular culture I kept finding the same messages everywhere: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. Commencement speeches are larded with the same clichés: Follow your passion. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are great. This is the gospel of self-trust.

The self effacing person is soothing and gracious, while the self-promoting person is fragile and jarring. Humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time, but egotism is a ravenous hunger in a small space—self-concerned, competitive, and distinction-hungry. Humility is infused with lovely emotions like admiration, companionship, and gratitude. “Thankfulness,” the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, said, “is a soil in which pride does not easily grow.”²

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit. In commenting on Beatitude One Alyce McKenzie writes, “The beatitude challenges those who forget their need for God and begin scaling the slippery heights of ambition or careening down the canyons of their own insecurities. The quality of being ‘poor in Spirit’ is the wellspring of active faith.”³ If Brooks and McKenzie are on to something here, we need to dig into this Beatitude and consider how we strive for that Spirit of poverty which looks beyond ourselves and finds our homeland in a country, an identity, greater than any political jurisdiction. We will get there, but as this is our first Sunday on the Beatitudes let us take a look at how they fit into Matthew’s gospel more broadly.

A number of biblical commentators have agreed that within Matthew’s gospel there is a structural form by which material at the beginning of the gospel parallels material at the end of

¹ Alyce M. McKenzie, *Matthew in Interpretation Bible Studies*, (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1998), p. 34.

² David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, (New York: Random House, 2015),

³ McKenzie, 34.

the gospel. The technical term for this is a chiasmic structure. This was not uncommon in other literature of the day; a type of organization that gave oral speakers a better chance of remembering the content of a message. These parallels stair step in toward the center. Of interest for our study of the Beatitudes is that the blessings we find in Matthew 5 are paralleled by woes in chapters 23-25.⁴ Luke's version of the Blessings / Woes lumps them together whereas Matthew separates them through this chiasmic technique. The use of chiasms also exists within sections of Matthew's gospel like the Sermon on the Mount. I offer three examples of this within the Sermon on Mount which impact the way we think and apply and Beatitudes.

First, the Beatitudes are located within the Sermon on the Mount, a Sermon so named because in Matt 5:1 Jesus goes up a Mountain to issue a teaching and at the conclusion of chapter 7 Jesus goes down that Mountain. I will just note briefly that commentators have drawn parallels to Moses going up the Mountain to receive the Ten Commandments and Torah with Jesus going up "the mountain". Given some of the other material we find in the Sermon on the Mount it is not a stretch to see the setting of the Beatitudes as an elaboration, a clarification, of the law. In Matthew's gospel Jesus does not want to dismantle the Torah and the prophets, but rather guide people in the fulfilling the intent of the law and prophets (5:17). Without making too fine a point on matters, for Jesus the living of the Torah is living the Beatitudes.

Second, the Beatitudes themselves would be paralleled by the teaching of Jesus in chapter 7, that good trees produce good fruit and that you shall know these good trees by their fruit. This is critical to note in any study of the Beatitudes which can often seem internally focused. Textually, the intent of this internal work, the emotional work, is not some end in itself. Rather, the goal is the training of disciples so that they might bear good fruit. Meditations on personal piety carry their fullest force when the results bear good fruit in the world.

My third example points to the center of the Sermon on the Mount. If we follow that chiasm stair stepping within The Sermon, we find smack dab in the middle of the chapter the Prayer which we call the Lord's Prayer. In some ways this makes perfect sense because the Lord's Prayer was very important for the early church. The *Didache*, used as a teaching tool for would be Christians, prescribed recitation of the Lord's Prayer three times a day.⁵ The relationship with the Beatitudes, then, is that there is something so central about the Lord's Prayer that it is a key to recovering a poverty of Spirit, to praying for our enemies, to not being anxious, and so forth. We live into these values when grounded; and the Lord's Prayer, according to Matthew's literary structure, does this for individuals and whole communities.

Mentioning our specific Beatitude for the day, Poor in Spirit, has sparked my awareness that beatitude one might get shorted if I do not go there soon.

The "poor" of Jesus' original pronouncement of blessing...not only refers to literal poverty, but also connotes a lack of arrogance and a sense of one's own need. Luke's beatitudes emphasize the literal, economic dimension. Matthew's addition of "in spirit" shifts the emphasis, but does not exclude literal poverty [Matthew did care about the poor (cf. 11:5; 25:31)]....From the time of the composition of the Psalms, "the poor" had been understood as a characterization of the true people of God, those who know their lives are not in their own control and that they are dependent on God. "Poor in spirit" makes this

⁴ Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (volume VIII), (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 113.

⁵ *The Didache*: 8:3. Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary by Aaron Milavec, (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 21.

explicit. Persons who are pronounced blessed are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity and security is in God. Their identity is not in what they know, but in having a certain (poverty of) spirit. The exact phrase “poor in spirit” was not found in any extant Jewish literature until it emerged in the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qumran community (1QM 14:7), which understood itself as the remnant, the true people of God...What is at stake in the phrase for both Qumran and Matthew is neither economics nor spirituality, but the identity of the people of God-- a Matthean theme (1:21).

“Theirs is the kingdom.” Thus far, Jesus has been presented as the king of the present and coming kingdom of God, the definitive one through whom God’s rule is manifested. The kingdom has been presented as the summary and focus of Jesus’ message, but no content has been given to the idea. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will present the nature of the life of the kingdom he proclaims and represents. He has reversed the idea of human kingship, and those to whom his kingdom belongs correspond to this...reversal. Just as the king is meek and poor in spirit...so also are those to whom his kingdom belongs. Here and elsewhere, Christology and discipleship are correlatives for Matthew.⁶

At this point I feel as if we have had as much biblical feed as most creatures can take in one sitting. How might we live into the “blessedness” which Matthew, Luke and the Psalms declare for the poor, the poor in Spirit, those who rely on the one we call God?

As Archbishop Ramsey noted, “Thankfulness is a soil in which pride does not easily grow”. In several of his letters the Apostle Paul puts it plainly in several different epistles. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice...The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God (Phil 4:4-6). And in his letter to the Thessalonians he wrote, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1st Thess 5:16-17). If “thankfulness” is linked with being Poor in Spirit, then we need to be intentional about giving thanks to God. Give thanks you are alive one more day. Give thanks for creation around us. Give thanks for the people in our lives who care. Give thanks for meaningful work, and in some cases any work. Give thanks. Rejoice in the Lord.

My second point of application is the importance of self-deprecating humour. I referenced G.K. Chesterton two weeks ago in my sermon, and here is another G.K. quote: “A characteristic of the great saints is their power of levity. Angels fly because they can take themselves lightly.”⁷ If we can not cringe at ourselves and circumstances, we are in a tough spot. To humbly, and with humour when appropriate, acknowledge the tragedy of our condition, the botched project, the irony of the situation is part of being Poor in Spirit. It is medicine for those of us racked with shame. It is release of burdens we were never meant to carry on our own. It is living into a Poverty of Spirit.

Finally, tomorrow is Canada day and on July 4th the people in the country of my birth will be celebrating as well. There will be lavish festivities and national self-promotion in both countries, as does happen in every country. As we participate in our national celebrations, though, I invite us to consider a pledge of Allegiance authored by two of my seminary

⁶ Ibid, p. 178

⁷ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publish Company, 1997), p.235.

professors: Nelson Kraybill and June Aliman Yoder. It is not long, and it need not be long. It is based upon the Pledge of Allegiance found in the U.S., but it applies to any person caught up in the fervor of a national holiday. It goes like this: “I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ, And to God’s kingdom for which he died— One Spirit-led people the world over, indivisible, With love and justice for all.”⁸

This pledge is, in fact, how I want to conclude the sermon of being Poor in Spirit as we prepare for Canada Day. It is a reminder that God is above Queen and country. It is a reminder that God’s chose non-violence as a means of security for the Divine kingdom. It is a reminder that God reigns over all the peoples of the world; we are no more special in God’s eyes than people of Cambodia or Cameroon. It is a reminder that God’s kingdom rests upon the pillars of love and justice for all. These are not bad things to remember as we near Canada Day. “I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ, And to God’s kingdom for which he died— One Spirit-led people the world over, indivisible, With love and justice for all.” Amen.

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⁸ Nelson Kraybill and June Aliman Yoder, *The Mennonite* (Aug 3, 2004); <https://themennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/08-03-14-Christian-pledge-of-Allegiance.pdf>