**Poor and blessed**

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Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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**Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 6:20-26**

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20)

Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. (Luke 6:24)

Today we are going to talk about woe and misery, about blessing and the kingdom of God, about poverty and wealth.

We are revisiting the Beatitudes – that part of Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels where they record Jesus telling his disciples who are blessed and why and (in Luke’s case) who are not. As Anabaptists, I think we believe that the teachings of Jesus are at the heart of the Scriptures, and that the Sermon on the Mount is at the heart of Jesus’s teaching. Matthew’s Beatitudes start off the Sermon on the Mount, which is the first extensive teaching found in Matthew’s gospel. But I think even we Anabaptists have overlooked these blessings as we have dived into the later sections of the sermon. For example, a Mennonite distinctive is that we, traditionally, don’t make swear oaths, based on Jesus’s words in Matthew 5:34-7. As far as I know, Anabaptists *haven’t* been known for their desire to arrive at blessedness. It’s unlikely, but maybe we can change that.

I will be honest and say I feel very inadequate to speaking to blessedness. I believe it could be cause radical changes in the way we feel about ourselves, about God, and about others to live out these blessings and avoid these woes. I doubt I can lead such a revolution, so the burden will be on you, too. I’ll do my best, but you’ll need to pay attention and go beyond my poor words.

What is *blessing*, anyway? Gregory of Nyssa says that one way we can understand blessing is by thinking of its opposite. And Gregory says the opposite of blessing is misery, the state of being miserable. I think we all understand being miserable; we all have our points of pain and distress, of sadness and shame, of failure and sorrow. Take the opposite of those states, and we begin to understand blessing. It’s not only Gregory who takes this tack of looking at opposites. Luke’s Beatitudes are paired with Woes, and these woes can remind us of what we are missing.

It is important, I think, to note this: Matthew lists eight beatitudes. The first one, and the eighth one, each end with “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The other beatitudes end with some other phrase, like “being comforted” or “seeing God.” The reason I think this is important is that I think Jesus is giving us the bookend of “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” as *another way* to describe blessedness. To be in the kingdom of heaven is to be blessed; to be blessed is to be in the kingdom of heaven. The other conclusions give examples or further synonyms of blessedness. So, over the course of these teachings, I hope we will understand blessedness a little better.

So, let’s look at the first beatitude. In Matthew’s version, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In Luke’s version, it’s a little balder: “Blessed are you who are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” And it’s accompanied by a woe: “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”

Now, I have heard sermons over my life on this beatitude, and the difference between them. And they tend to take one of two forms. In the first form, there is an emphasis on Matthew’s version: being poor *in spirit*, which is taken to mean something like sorrow for our own sinfulness and a recognition of our own wretchedness before God as a required step before we can enter the kingdom of heaven. And, having chosen this understanding, it is imported into Luke’s beatitude; Jesus must mean the same thing there.

In the other form, there is more of an emphasis on Luke’s version, “blessed are you poor,” with the understanding that Jesus is particularly addressing those who are economically poor and politically weak. The beatitude becomes a political statement – despite your lack of money and power in the current political arrangement, you are citizens of God’s kingdom. In turn, this is usually imported back to Matthew’s version; perhaps Matthew, or some other editor, added the “in spirit” to depoliticize Jesus’s words.

I think both forms are wrong; that is, both are trying too hard to make the blessing fit a certain predetermined understanding. In the first, trying too hard to make Jesus into the personal savior who will come into your heart if you’ll acknowledge your sins as your first step towards him. In the second, trying too hard to make Jesus into just a political figure (who just happens to share our progressive agenda).

Further, there are other kinds of poverty that people face, things that make us miserable because of something we lack.

Some of us experience a poverty of relationships. We are lonely, and missing the kinds of support we need to help us thrive. But to such belongs the kingdom of heaven: a place where there are others to depend on, and who need us.

Some of us experience a poverty of emotional and mental health. We face depression, sadness, and despair. But to such belongs the kingdom of heaven: a place where we find kind words and emotional support, where prayers are asked and answered on our behalf.

Some of us experience a poverty of physical health. Our bodies fail in various ways, and, in any case, is eventually temporary. As the title of the Flannery O’Connor story that Michael Gulker reminded me of: “You can’t be any poorer than dead.”

As I was preparing this sermon, Bess was working in the garden. She slipped, and fell on her back, and eventually we decided we had to go to the emergency room. As we sat in the waiting room, I thought to myself: ok, here’s is a test. In what sense does this particular piece of bad health suggest that the kingdom of heaven belongs to us? And these three ideas came to mind:

1. The people who packed out the emergency room on a Saturday night were all kinds: wealthy, and poor (but mostly poor), white and black, men and women, old and young. Just as God’s kingdom is.
2. I was aware of our own relative wealth, knowing that we were there by choice, and that our health insurance would pay for the lion’s share of the emergency room bill. Being made aware of where we stand seems like a kingdom thing.
3. I was aware, again, that our live is temporary, and our health subject to change in a twinkling. Being reminded that our temporary nature, this *memento mori*, puts me in my place and reminds me of my need for God and God’s kingdom.

We are all called to consider what we consider our riches, and what we consider our poverty. God calls us to use the resources we have to further the kingdom of God, lest we have already received our total consolation.

Bess and I heard a story this week, told by a man at a training we attended. He grew up and Africa, and named his grandmother as his great mentor in the faith. One time, their family only had a bag of beans to eat. Another family came to them, asking for food. Because the grandmother was a woman of great love and faith, she gave those beans to the other family. When asked why she did it, she replied that God would take care of her and her family. And God did: that day, they received food and money enough ­– their daily bread – to carry on.

This story encourages me to be generous with my own resources, to trust God in my generosity and in my poverty.

I am wondering what kinds of poverty you face. I encourage you to think how God is with you in your poverty, and how to receive the kingdom of God as the fulfilment of the promised blessing.

I also encourage you to consider what kinds of wealth you have, and how you to throw those resources into God’s projects. Is there some new effort, some new way to say no to the wealth of this world, and yes to the wealth of God?

But I want to be clear: this sermon is not about making you feel guilty, and, if you do, please consider setting that aside. Rather, again quoting Michael from a conversation we had this week (and I think he gets it from his friend Tom Aquinas), my desire is that this sermon, and this series, helps to inflame your heart towards God, towards blessing, towards beatitude.

Because the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God belongs to such as you. Welcome to the kingdom.