

Because We Have Each Other  
United Church of Broomfield  
February 2, 2020

It had been years since he'd last been home. First, Jason went out of state to college. Then there was the computer-programming job he landed after graduation. He stuck with it for a few years, learning the ins and outs of the software industry. Then he joined a couple friends in starting a company. Together they rode the dot-com bubble till it burst. They lost big in the Silicon Valley crash, but they didn't lose everything. A few years later they were back, stronger than before. By the time he reached his mid-30s, Jason was a millionaire (at least on paper). That wasn't all that impressive in the circles he frequented, but it made him a rock star back home. Jason's dirty little secret was that he'd earned big, but he also spent big. His balance sheet looked impressive, but he was chronically short on cash. Some months he had trouble making his credit-card payments.

Then the news came that Jason's mother was sick. She was in the hospital: heart catheterization, possible bypass surgery. He hopped the next flight home — first-class, using frequent-flyer miles, of course — and soon found himself seated in a vinyl-covered chair at the foot of his mother's bed, watching the jagged, multi-colored lines dance across the heart monitor.

His mother was glad to see him, and he was glad to see her. "I've stayed away too long," he confessed, with a sigh.

"I know," she replied.

"I've done well for myself," he said, as if some justification were needed.

"I know that too. I'm proud of you."

Then his mother asked the question that stopped Jason in his tracks: "But are you happy?"

Jason realized, with a shudder, that he didn't know how to answer.

It's a fictional story, but its details are real enough. Lots of people today are chasing dreams of happiness so furiously that the chase itself has become everything. The goal is like the electric rabbit that zips around the dog track, just ahead of the pack of greyhounds. Somehow, they never do catch it.

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One bright, sunny day, Jesus sits his disciples down on a hillside. Beyond them are the throngs of people who've begun to follow him everywhere. He begins to speak. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases his words, here's some of what Jesus said:

*You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*

*You're blessed when you are content with just who you are — no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), Matthew 5:3-5

We call them the beatitudes. There are eight of them: eight statements of what it means to be blessed by God. They were a radical, countercultural message back then, and they are equally so today — especially to our friend Jason, to the many people like him and to the many more people who would like to *be* him.

Remember how, when Jason's mother asked him if he's happy, he didn't know what to say? There are some biblical translators who believe the beatitudes should be translated with the word "happy":

*"Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!"*<sup>2</sup> And so on.

Happy indeed are those who turn to Jesus Christ, who follow his ways, who trust his teachings over against the sometimes tawdry wisdom of the world, whose motto is summed up in the bumper-sticker slogan "The one who dies with the most toys wins!"

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A great many of us, when we hear the word "blessings," know right away what we're expected to do: We have to start counting! "*Count your blessings!*" the old song goes, "*name them one by one. Count your blessings; see what God has done!*"<sup>3</sup>

It's a catchy tune, and an even catchier thought. "Look around you. It's not so bad as all that. There are lots of things about your life that will make you happy, if only you count them all up and realize how many you've got!" It's a comforting thought, but it's not at all what Jesus means.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The poor in spirit, by definition, are those *who have no blessings to count*. They are the spiritually destitute, the chronically depressed, those who have stood up to face life, only to feel like life has run them over.

*These* are the ones Jesus says are not only happy – they are blessed — in God's estimation!

One commentator has pointed out that the Greek word *makarios* (which means "happy" or "blessed") could just as well be translated "Congratulations!"<sup>4</sup> It's as though the Publisher's Clearing House camera crew suddenly showed up on the doorstep of the poorest, most destitute person you could imagine, holding one of those giant cardboard checks. But instead of lots of zeros on it, it says, "*Congratulations, sad person! You've struck it rich! Here's a deed to the kingdom of God — and it's got your name on it!*"

It's not a matter of counting one's blessings, because the truly poor in spirit have no blessings to count. Rather, the blessings come from the outside, from God and our community of faith. God blesses the poor in spirit not by relieving them of their sufferings. God blesses them *through* their sufferings...and surrounding them with a loving, supportive community who is there on the journey.

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Back in 2005, a writer named Amitav Ghosh, wrote a remarkable op-ed column in the *New York Times*. He was telling a story of some victims of the terrible tsunamis that struck the Andaman and Nicobar Islands back in

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:3, *Good News Bible* (American Bible Society, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Edwin O. Excell, 1897.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 35.

December of 2004. These tiny islands, a territory of India, are smack dab in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Most of the islands are low, barely above sea level. The tsunami roared ashore and just about swept those islands clean. There were survivors, but when the waters receded and they went back to where their homes used to be, there was nothing left. Literally, *nothing*.

These had once been middle-class people. Indian society is hugely bureaucratic. People live by identity cards, driver's licenses, ration books, diplomas. Suddenly, all that essential documentation had been swept away. Hundreds of refugees found themselves in a makeshift camp, with no homes, no money, no jobs, no identities: only the dreamlike tales they told of what their lives used to be.

The refugees' immediate material needs were being watched over by a Roman Catholic priest by the name of Father Johnson. There was enough food and clothing in the camp: a massive global relief effort had seen to that. The refugees were in no immediate danger. But there was one sort of poverty Father Johnson had not found a way to address: poverty of spirit.

Some leaders of the refugees came to him. What could he tell them, they wanted to know, about their future? They had lost so much. What was to become of them? It was a question the priest was ill-equipped to answer. The scope of the disaster was massive — almost beyond imagination. Relief agencies were making decisions on a day-to-day basis. All he could promise them, for the foreseeable future, was a tent over their heads, food to eat, clothing to wear.

It soon emerged that what the refugees were yearning for was some documentation, some piece of paper they could hold in their hands: something that told who they were, that indicated that the world somehow knew of their predicament. "Could you at least get us some paper and pens?" they wanted to know.

This, Father Johnson was able to provide. He gave the refugee leaders a pad of paper and some pens. But soon, this led to another uproar, with those who'd been given the paper and pens under siege. As Amitav Ghosh tells it, "People began to push and jostle, clamoring to have their names written down. It seemed to occur to them simultaneously that identity was now no more than a matter of assertion, and nothing seemed to matter more than to create a trail of paper." Ghosh added that somehow the refugees came to believe "that on this, the random scribbling of a name on a sheet of paper in a refugee camp, depended the eventual reclamation of a life."<sup>5</sup>

What a sad story this is, yet how true-to-life! The ultimate poverty of spirit is believing that one's life no longer matters, that no one knows, no one cares. There are people in our world — yes, maybe even in our neighborhood — who fear that such may be true of their own lives. They see themselves sinking inexorably down. They thrash around, seeking to lay hold of anything that promises to give their lives some substance, some support. Even a scrap of paper with their name on it.

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What Jesus is saying to the poor in spirit is that they can be happy because they are blessed. They are blessed because there is one who knows their name, who promises to be in relationship with them. That one is none other than God, whom we come to know personally in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Amitav Ghosh, "Identities Lost at Sea," *New York Times*, January 14, 2005.

In the words of the great Scottish Bible teacher William Barclay, “The [one] who is poor in spirit is the [one] who has realized that things mean nothing, and that God means everything.”<sup>6</sup> Barclay also says, “The greatness of the beatitudes is that they are not wistful glimpses of some future beauty; they are not even golden promises of some distant glory; they are triumphant shouts of bliss for a permanent joy that nothing in the world can ever take away.”<sup>7</sup>

Philip Simmons, a professor of English at Lake Forest College in Illinois, was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, in 1993. Simmons was 35 years old, a young husband and father. Suddenly, he had to learn what it means to die. In the year 2000, he published a book, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of An Imperfect Life*. Here are some words he wrote: “We have all heard poems, songs, and prayers that exhort us to see God in a blade of grass, a drop of dew, a child's eyes, or the petals of a flower. Now when I hear such things, I say that's too easy.”

Simmons went on to explain that our “greater challenge is to see God not only in the eyes of the suffering child but in the suffering itself.” As examples, he wrote, “To thank God for broken bones and broken hearts, for everything that opens us to the mystery of our humanness.” He continued:

*The challenge is to stand at the sink with your hands in the dishwasher, fuming over a quarrel with your spouse, children at your back clamoring for attention, the radio blating the bad news from Bosnia, and to say “God is here, now, in this room, here in this dishwasher, in this dirty spoon.” Don't talk to me about flowers and sunshine and waterfalls: this is the ground, here, now, in all that is ordinary and imperfect, this is the ground in which life sows the seeds of our fulfillment. The imperfect is our paradise.*<sup>8</sup>

Theologian Richard Rohr said, “[The Beatitudes] offer us a more spacious world, a world where I do not have to explain everything, fix everything, or control anything beyond myself, a world where we can allow a Larger Mystery to work itself out through us and in us. These things are done to us more than anything we can do. The Beatitudes are about changing me, not changing other people. Wonderfully, it is not about being right anymore. Who can fully do the Beatitudes “right”? It is about being in right relationship, which is a very different agenda.”<sup>9</sup>

It's easy to read Jesus' beatitudes, hear all that talk of blessings and begin making a list of all the ways we ourselves are blessed. But that's not the way to read the beatitudes. Jesus doesn't want us to be happy because we've counted our blessings. Likewise, we shouldn't strive to be or need to be poor in spirit, hungry, meek, thirsty or persecuted in order to be blessed. Jesus wants us to know — whatever life may bring — that we *are* blessed, and to live that blessing. We are blessed – whether we're rich or poor, hungry or satiated, confident or meek...we are blessed because we have God and each other to be with us, always.

AMEN

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<sup>6</sup> William Barclay, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1956), 87.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life* (Bantam, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Jesus' Plan for the New World*.