

Blessed are the poor in spirit

Blessed are they...this precious bit of wisdom waves a flag for those who, until now, might have thought themselves abandoned by heaven's plans. The poor in spirit...those who mourn...the meek...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...these are the 'have nots' in a world of power and privilege.

Then come the rest - peacemakers and the pure in heart - those who are merciful and those whose goodness is such a threat to the powerful that they find themselves persecuted. Jesus has just kicked open heaven's doors, and made some serious claims. And the people in power get nervous.

It is easy for us to hear these words and accept that Jesus meant what he said. It is harder for us to recognize that we are too often on the wrong side of the equation that Jesus is proposing. These blessings - these beatitudes - expose our modern privilege; and they don't speak with the same power to "*The Church Today*" as they did to those whom the religious and the Roman authorities had so callously pushed to one side back in Jesus' time.

In a time when it is important to ask questions like: 'what is the church for?' 'Whom does the church serve?' and 'Why does the church matter?', this list of 'blessings' might begin to set us straight.

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And the first is the most startling.

Who exactly are the poor in spirit? Those who have tried and failed? Those whom the church treats as clients? Those who live on the fringes?

We are each spiritual beings - our spiritual needs as unique and diverse as the population. And even those who pay attention to their 'spiritual health' are not always the best judges of the state of it. And I will be so bold as to suggest that to be poor in spirit is to be unacknowledged by those who are charged with spiritual things (and that's all of us.)

To be poor in spirit is to long for something that is hard to define (and thus hard to find.) To be poor in spirit is to have your spiritual fire doused by those who would diminish you to keep their own notions of spiritual harmony and purity secure. Poverty of spirit (in this day and age) is like economic poverty - the distribution of wealth; the rules around how such spiritual gifts are nurtured/recognized/valued are made by those at the top of the food chain.

The church is supposed to be the place where gifts of the spirit are gathered, nurtured, encouraged and celebrated. Sadly, this is not always the case.

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Churches can fill that void for those who are searching, and churches ought to be the testing ground for those who have deep questions to ask about what it means to be led and fed by the spirit of God - we can be that place, but it requires a level of humility and 'servant-mindedness' that can be hard to find and even harder to maintain.

Not because of the pandemic, but because we have a history of doing just what Jesus opponents did - we ask more of people than the gospel requires. We make rules and we promote impossibilities where morality and righteousness are concerned. We say "God loves you, but..." and impose our fears and uncertainties and turn them into expectations that God does not share.

On a day set aside for "all saints" (not a typical Presbyterian feast day...) I wonder if Jesus is here asking us to redefine 'saint' once and for all...? I don't mean that we throw away all those venerable memories contained in the lives (and myths) surrounding St Francis, St Nicholas, St Valentine and the like...but in light of the beatitudes, perhaps we need to temper the idea of 'saintliness' with a model that the beatitudes seems to present. Saints are not JUST those who have come to the end of a life of discipleship to gain heavenly reward - perhaps saints are those whose questions and curiosity (from the fringes of our congregations and communities)

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force us to widen our perspective of what heaven might be - or grant us a privileged glimpse into the work of God among people who are not at all like us...

The image of 'the great cloud of witnesses' is all well and good - and it is not wrong to remember with fond feelings those who lived as blessed examples and are now in holy company - but the streets and schools and alleys and coffee shops are brimming with saints. Saints who might teach us a thing or two about living faithfully in a faithless world. Jesus knew it - and pointed to them with glorious determination in everything he did. Are we ready to follow his lead? That is, after all, the Churches calling.