

## ***Poor in Spirit***

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*Wisdom is with the humble.* —Proverbs 11:2

*Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart."*  
—Matthew 11:29

*Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for their is the kingdom of heaven."*  
—Matthew 5:3

### **Invitation to Worship** (Micah 6:8)

God has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
**And what does the Holy One require of you?**  
To do justice, to love kindness,  
**And to walk humbly with our God.**

Ancient Witness: Luke 14:7-14

In this morning's passage from Luke, we have a scene of Jesus eating with the Pharisees. Now, it must be said that Jesus did not share much in common with the established religious culture of his day, even though he was known as a Rabbi. Socially, theologically and economically, Jesus and his possession-less followers were outsiders.

And what does Jesus say? He gives them a lesson on humility. Often we have seen how Jesus reverses roles in his stories and short, pithy sayings. But here, Jesus is affirming ideas that are rather common in Hebrew wisdom. The idea that God humbles the proud and exalts the humble would have been a familiar theme to the Pharisees. When Jesus reminds them to take the seat of least honor, the lowest place at the wedding celebration, he is helping them remember something that they had once learned but forgotten. One gets the feeling that this is something that must be continually relearned and practiced. "Go invite the lowly, the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to your next dinner party," was a reminder to the religious practitioners that they still had a long way to go. "Those who promote themselves will be demoted, and those who demote themselves will be promoted." Jesus is affirming the importance within his own tradition of demoting oneself, of practicing humility. You know, Jesus was the hardest on those who thought they were right, that they knew it all, that they had perfect faith. He really went after the proud, the self-satisfied, those who exalted themselves.

But the good news of this story is despite their self-serving tendencies, Jesus did not give up on them. In fact, there he is, eating with them, breaking bread with them. And we can be assured that the God we see in Jesus does not give up on us, either.

When that wonderful writer, Annie Dillard, was in the ninth grade, like most people her age she was suspicious of the values and traditions of her parents. Her parents had been taking her to church ever since she could remember. Annie wasn't too sure she really wanted to be in church, but she went to church nonetheless because it was important to her parents. On a typical Sunday morning she was sitting in her usual place, the first row of the balcony in a large stone carved church in Pittsburg. She enjoyed the balcony because she could watch the people below, the women in their fancy dresses, and the men in their stiff shirts and neck ties. In her opinion the people had gathered to remind God how hard they had worked and how few pleasures they took for themselves during the week.

Now, Annie was at that age when she was quite sure of herself. She thought she knew better than anyone. And on that particular Sunday she realized it was Communion Sunday. Annie always did her best to avoid communion. To be honest the whole thing seemed absurd to her. It had no real meaning. Annie wondered what Christ must have thought of the whole charade. She watched as the silver trays were passed out, with the cubes of bread and the Welch's grape juice. Then as she was looking around a strange feeling came over her. She saw her friends praying, even the boys she had seen at the dance the night before. They were praying. It seemed almost unbelievable that they could take communion so seriously. Then she watched as the adults prayed. Every head was bowed in the sanctuary; no one was moving. As she watched she was alerted to a new feeling, something she had never experienced before. "I didn't know what to make of this," she thought to herself. As the ushers made their way to the Table, Annie Dillard realized that she knew most of the people present and, more importantly, she knew what they loved, and she wasn't so sure it was God. But there they were.

It was there in that old church that she experienced the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. The people that she doubted came together as flawed in need of bread and juice. And that morning Annie realized why we celebrate communion. It's not because we deserve it. It's not because we have been so good. Rather we come to the Table *in need of something we cannot do for ourselves*.

According to the prophet, what does God require? Justice and kindness, yes, but also to walk humbly. A teachable spirit. With what shall we come before God? With humility. With openness. We stand as an empty vessel, an empty cup, before the Holy Mystery, that gives us something we need, something we are unable to give ourselves.

A few years ago, I watched a T.V. documentary about an Inner Peace program in a prison. Through meditation and reflection, the inmates talked about achieving more peace and clarity in their lives, and how this enabled them to make better decisions and enhanced their lives. The program is based on the assumption that every person has within themselves the resources to find this state of peace and their divine image, no matter the external circumstances. It was striking how motivated these inmates were to find this peace—how acutely aware they were that they *needed it*. They were hungry for it.

This reminded me of a period of time when I was a social worker for inmates in a halfway house, an alternative to prison overseen by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. I'll tell you a secret. Sometimes I found a greater affinity with them than the parishioners of my small congregation.

What connected me and some of those inmates was what Jesus called a “poverty of spirit.” And my experience was that churches often contain the most self-satisfied people in the world! The church can stand to learn from programs like A.A. or programs for inmates where *the participants begin with the assumption that they need to change.*

Because, you see, when the circumstances cannot be altered, the only thing left to change is oneself. But sometimes there is very little desire for internal change among us church-going people. Let’s just be honest. People often do not seek inner peace in the church because we feel that we already have it! But I have news for us all—we don’t.

Anthony de Mello used to start some of his talks by saying to his audience, “Your life is a mess.” And people would get angry and indignant. “How dare you say that! My life’s not a mess.” But he would just smile.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The word for “poor” that Matthew uses is *ptochoi*, which literally means, “the very empty ones, those who are crouching.” These are the bent over beggars—the nobodies who have nothing left. So from a spiritual perspective, they are desperate, destitute, desiring the peace that comes from within. They realize their own lack of inner peace, that their life is a mess! They are seriously seeking; they are walking humbly; they are hungry. Like the father of the boy who was having seizures who said to Jesus, “I believe, but help my unbelief!” Blessed are those who have a spirit that is starving and desperate, a spirit that begs and is impervious to shame and humiliation. This reminds me of the famous saying that Christianity is simply one beggar telling another beggar where they found food.

Another way one could paraphrase this: “Blessed are those we are not self-satisfied, who yearn for inner peace, who desire greater spiritual spiritual awareness, change and transformation.” Because unless we acknowledge the poverty of our spirit, we are not blessed. Unless we see that we need to change, that our life is a mess, that it’s out of control, we’ll miss it.

Blessed are those who have doubts and fears that drive them to a deeper experience of the Sacred Reality. Blessed are those who are desperate for that connection, who have been humbled by life and who are now ready to turn whole-heartedly to something that has been there all along.

I’m going to end this morning by a wonderful poem by Rumi, that mystical Muslim of deep wisdom. It’s called “Love Dogs.”

*One night a man was crying,  
“Allah, Allah!”  
His lips grew sweet with the praising,  
until a cynic said,  
“So! I have heard you  
calling out, but have you ever  
gotten any response?”  
The man had no answer for that.  
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.*

*He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,  
in a thick, green foliage,  
“Why did you stop praising?”  
“Because I’ve never heard anything back.”  
“This longing you express  
is the return message.”  
The grief you cry out from  
draws you toward union.  
Your pure sadness that wants help  
is the secret cup.  
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.  
That whining is the connection.  
There are love dogs no one knows the names of.  
Give your life to be one of them.*

Let us become love dogs. Blessed are we, who are poor in spirit!

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*