

## **Homily – Blessed are the Poor in Spirit**

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A few years back I was a chaplain at Stanford Medical Center, and one morning I walked into a patient's room to find a woman lying in a bed with a man sitting next to her. They were despondent. The woman had been pregnant with twins and they had just lost both of them. I think it is fair to say that these two people were in one of those groupings of people we just heard Susan read about in the beatitudes. They were poor in spirit. And when you walk with someone who is poor in spirit you don't just say things will get better. You don't say I wonder what you will learn from this. And it is certainly not the right time to say all things work for good. Instead, you are present with the person who is poor in spirit. You sit. You listen. I have found that the best thing to say is "this is not the way things are supposed to be. Is it?" Some of you may recognize that I have said this to you. This is not the way life is supposed to be. Is it? This death, this job loss, this health crisis, this is not the way it is supposed to be. Except, except we all have these experiences. We all know that sometimes bad things happen to bad people and sometimes bad things happen to good people.

Today's Gospel reading is the beginning of what we call Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In these teachings, or Beatitudes, Jesus describes a universe turned on its head. This is a world where the usual might-makes-right, survival-of-the-fittest, rules, and priorities just don't apply. In this kingdom of God the poor are the wealthiest of all. The mourners are the ones who receive comfort. The starving sit at laden tables. Those who live meekly inherit everything. The peacemakers are God's children. And the victims of persecution win choice rewards. And as we ponder these teachings it is important to allow these reversals to provoke and instruct us, because they reveal essential truths about the nature of God.

What Jesus bears witness to, in these sayings we know as the Beatitudes, is God's unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss. God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, unwanted, and broken. God isn't obsessed with the shiny and the impressive. Instead, God is too busy sticking close to what's messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive.

This is important to remember, because the first thing I tend to ask when I'm hurting is, "Where is God? Why has God abandoned me?" The Beatitudes assure me that God doesn't exit my life when I find myself in low places. If anything, God is most present in the shadows. Most attentive in the fire. God is always close to the destitute, the anguished, the lost, and the confused. God faithfully accompanies those who go days, weeks, months, and years, hungry for a sign, a word, a crumb. And we must

remember that our hunger is not indicative of God's absence. Our hunger is the sign we seek. The blessing we chase resides in the darkness.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that a life lived to fulfill God's dream for creation will involve suffering. But even in the depths, Jesus implies that there is reason for gratitude. You see in the Beatitudes, Jesus shares his eightfold way of happiness. Jesus says there is a blessing in poverty for you in that you partake of God's dream. Jesus says there is a blessing in the pain of loss, because in your grief you experience God's comfort. Jesus says there is blessing in being unsatisfied about the injustice in our world, for as God's justice comes more and more, you will feel more and more fulfilled.

And, with these counterintuitive sayings and others like them, Jesus enrolls us in advanced classes in the school of gratitude. He shows us the disadvantages of advantages, and the advantages of disadvantages. Jesus makes this paradox most dramatic through his own death. His suffering and crucifixion will eventually bring hope and freedom to all humanity, hope and freedom that could come no other way. Here is the deepest lesson of gratitude, then. We are to be grateful not just in the good times, but also in the bad times; to be grateful not just in plenty, but also in need; to maintain thankfulness not just in laughter, but also through tears and sorrow. In the New Testament letter of James it is written that "we should even rejoice in trials, because through trials come patience, character, and wisdom." And the Apostle Paul wrote "I have learned to be content with whatever I have" And, "Give thanks in all circumstances"

The words "in all circumstances" shouldn't be confused with "for all circumstances,". But neither should they be thinned to mean "in easy circumstances." Even in pain, we can find a place of gratitude, a place where alongside the agony of loss we still count and appreciate what remains.

You may lose a loved one, or facet after facet of your physical health, but you can still be grateful for what you have left. And what if you lose more, and more, and more, if bad goes to worse? Perhaps at some point, all of us are reduced to despair, but my hunch is—and I hope I never need to prove this in my own life, but I may, any of us may—my hunch is that having lost everything, one may still be able to hold on to one's attitude, one's practiced habit of gratitude, of turning to God in Job-like agony and saying, "For this breath, thanks. For this tear, thanks. For this memory of something I used to enjoy but now have lost, thanks. For this ability not simply to rage over what has been taken, but to celebrate what was once given, thanks."

Before I conclude let me share one more learning I had from being a chaplain. This is another one of those upside down things. As a chaplain when you walk into a

patient's room you always ask for permission to come in. Hospitals are a place where patients feel they have very little control. Nurses and doctors come in and out. Sometime patients are awakened every hour of the night and there can be the noise of beeping and alarms going off. Patients have little control over their surroundings and have little control over their own bodies. Their bodies are out of control. So one of the gifts that a chaplain gives to a patient is the gift of control. The patient can tell the chaplain to go away, and if they do then this was a valuable and important gift given by the chaplain to the patient. And the chaplain can give thanks for the opportunity to give this gift. God's wisdom is that we embrace and give thanks for an upside down world. May we be a people and a community that embraces the upside down love of God.