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The National Presbyterian Church

Beatitudes: Poor Me!

Psalm 40:1-5,11,13,17. Luke 15:11-24; Matthew 7:7-8, 12-13

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In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ in what we call the Beatitudes. These nine statements (with eight themes) that I have just read form the preface to three chapters (Matthew 5-7) that we call the Sermon on the Mount. So Jesus has this great sermon (or body of teaching: if you want to find the center or core of Jesus' teaching this is a good place to go, along with Matthew 13 in which Jesus teaches the parables). But here is the center of Jesus' teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount, and it begins with these "Beatitudes" as a preface, as statements that clearly are meant to influence our understanding of all the rest of what Jesus goes on to say. We call these statements the "beatitudes" because a "beatitude" is simply a statement about blessedness or about happiness, where blessedness or happiness are to be found.

And Jesus speaks about this because clearly he, and clearly God, are concerned about your happiness and mine. Let me put it this way: before Jesus preaches on all the topics covered in the Sermon on the Mount, he wants to say to those who listen to him "*I'm concerned, God my Father is concerned, about your happiness; and if you want to find happiness – this is where it lies, in following my teaching*." And this interest of God in our happiness needs to be emphasized because there are some people, some Christians, who don't think that this is much of God's concern at all. God may want to give us eternal life, that's great! God may want to forgive us our sins, that's great! God may even want to save us! But is this same God really concerned about my happiness right here and now? Sometimes we, well, sort of skip that part. But Jesus is saying, "don't skip it!" It's right there. It's right there in his teaching at the beginning of his most famous sermon of all.

Of course when we speak about happiness, Jesus is not speaking about a happiness that is frivolous. He is not speaking about a happiness that is trivial. He's not speaking about a fake happiness in which we put on a smile when there is no song in our hearts or deep down in the depth of our being at all. Indeed the opposite is true. The happiness which he is speaking about is precisely about carrying some kind of a song deep within our being. The Psalmist speaks about this repeatedly: "Sing a new song" he writes! (Psalms 33, 40, 96, 98, 144, 149). God wants to give to us a song which lives within us –and surfaces, sometimes when we least expect it. We all know, I think, the power of songs. Some songs we want to remember, some we don't, but they come to our minds at the craziest of times. They are always there. Well God wants to place this

song deep within our being. He wants us to have this sense of well-being and hope and of gratitude and joy and happiness somewhere in the depth of our being which is there no matter what happens to us in life.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is part of our Presbyterian Church constitution, was written almost 400 years ago. It begins with this question: "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer is "***To glorify God"*** (and many Presbyterians just stop there. They say, we're to focus on God. God is to be the center of our being. True! But then the catechism goes on to say) "***and enjoy God forever***." This is written by Puritans. They sometimes get a bad rap for being joyless. But they're the ones who wrote this, and indeed if you read their history they are more joyful than many people give them credit for. But what they are saying is that right at the core of our understanding of life-lived-with-God, made known in Jesus Christ, one of two "chief ends" is that we find our joy and our happiness – and that we do so through glorifying God. In other words: there is happiness to be found! And this is what *God* wants for us. And Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with this in mind, by speaking first of all not just about, do's and don'ts, but about our blessedness, and indeed, as the Greek word *makarios* is more faithfully translated, about our happiness.

This happiness is God's passion for your life and my life, in a world in which he knows things can be hard. Jesus is not naïve. The world in which Jesus lives is a hard world. It's a world in which there is evil: his enemies are going to crucify him to death. And yet he still speaks about happiness. Indeed, you may be among those who feel precisely this way – that in this world there's no happiness for you; that life is unfair; that life is harder than you thought it would be. But Jesus would reassure you by saying: "I know that! But I still want you to think about and pursue my path for your happiness!"

There's no doubt about it: we live in a world in which there is evil that is real, and which has been unmasked in recent weeks and months, more clearly than at any time since 9-11, and probably since the evil of Nazi-ism in World War II. Jesus was not oblivious to such evil, and yet he still speaks into this kind of world about God's passion for our happiness.

Indeed, Jesus speaks about happiness with authority. He speaks about happiness not just as a pastor or a preacher but as a king – the way that the whole story of the Sermon on the Mount is set up by its context I chapter 4, it's "Jesus the king" who is speaking to people like you and me; the speaker is authoritative! Or, to put it another way, these eight statements are in a sense the principles or the ethos of the kingdom that he came to establish.

If you turn to the pages of Jesus' Bible, our Old Testament, it is absolutely no accident that the two books that speak most about happiness are books written by the two greatest kings in Israel – King Solomon and King David.

- The book of Psalms speaks about happiness. One of the references was in our reading in Psalm 40. On twenty nine occasions the book of Psalms speaks about happiness.

- The book of Proverbs speaks on a number of occasions, much less than the Psalms but more than any other book apart from the Psalms.

This is what the kings speak about in relationship to their kingdoms, the kind of kingdom they want to be ruler of, that God wants to establish, with God as the ultimate king. So, Jesus the king ("Christ" or "Messiah" primarily means "king") comes on the scene speaking about the kingdom of God and proclaiming good news about where happiness is to be found.

So let's go back to the text, let's go back to the scripture and set the scene again, and read for you but with more detail from the end of Matthew Chapter 4 (4:23) through the beginning of Chapter 5: Jesus teaching on the Beatitudes.

Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

> [DR: Note that there is no kingdom unless there is a king; and Jesus is the king.
> There is no kingdom unless there are people; and you and I are the people of the kingdom.
> And there is no kingdom unless there are laws and principles that govern that kingdom, that create the ethos of that land. And Jesus is now sharing the ethos of the kingdom into which you and I are invited under his lordship as our king].

Jesus begins to speak up, having climbed up a mountain, just as Moses did, to receive the word of God on a mountain. In contrast to Moses' time, though, when others could not get close to God and Moses, now Jesus invites everybody to come close to him, and to hear what the king has to say. And what he says is this:

> ***Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven***.
> Happy are those who mourn for they will be comforted.
> Happy are the meek for they will inherit the earth.
> Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.
> Happy are the merciful for they will receive mercy.
> Happy are the pure in heart for they will see God.
> Happy are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.
> Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.
> Happy are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice. Be glad for your reward is great in Heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

So these are the Beatitudes. These are the principles of the Kingdom of God over which Jesus is the king, the king who has come into our midst, and who invites us into citizenship.

But surely, surely we cannot *hear* those Beatitudes; we cannot *read* those Beatitudes without thinking that in some measure at least they are very strange indeed; very strange indeed. I mean,

- Jesus brings together the words happiness and persecution. How strange is that?
- Jesus brings together meekness and happiness. Not too frequently do we hear that.
- Jesus brings together the concepts of mourning and happiness; poverty of spirit and happiness.

Clearly there is a disconnect here between Jesus' teaching and what we tend to hear in the society around us today about the usual channels and places to go in order to find happiness. And it's not just a disconnect between us and our 21st century society, but I think with every society.

Go back to what John Calvin, our theological forefather, says on the Beatitudes, and you'll discover him pointing out that in Geneva in the 1500s this was not the normal expected way that happiness would be found either (*Calvin's Commentary on the Gospels*) -- there is no mention of success or wealth, or power or sex, or ease or entertainment, or education of health.

No! This is strange. This is different: a list of unexpected statements, at times seemingly bizarre, characteristics and experiences which surely must have left the people sitting on the hillside with Jesus scratching their heads and saying "You preach well, Jesus! But I really don't understand a word you said. What are you getting at? I don't get it!"

I think, though, that if this was in fact the response that Jesus elicited, then Jesus would, in fact, not have been upset at all, but quite the reverse: I think he would have been really quite happy! -- because we know that Jesus taught this way intentionally: to elicit a response, positive or negative, or merely a "What?!" That is, Indeed when you look at Jesus' teaching in the pages of the Gospel (and you see this most explicitly, as I shared last year, in the Parables), Jesus deliberately makes statements, exaggerations, jarring contrasts, and so on, to stir people up and to make them think, to engage them in conversation. And these statements about happiness are very much in line with this: designed by Jesus, somehow incomplete, until you and I engage in a conversation with God and with Jesus as to what the statements may actually mean. They are precisely intended to make us go "Huh? What does that mean?" And Jesus would say "Well, let's chat about this together, shall we?"

So, with this understanding, what's going to happen in the next few months in our sermons is that we're going to engage together with Jesus on each of these statements, one by one, beginning today with the first of these statements, the first of these Beatitudes, the first of these claims as to where happiness is to be found: a statement about being *poor in spirit*: "Happy are the poor in spirit," says Jesus, "for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven."

> What on earth does Jesus mean by this phrase poor in spirit? And how in the world is it related to happiness and to being a part of the kingdom of Heaven. "Blessed or happy are the poor in spirit" (Is this where *you* think happiness lies?) "for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Well, maybe happiness in the future – but Jesus actually is using the present tense, meaning "right here and now – "Happy right here and now are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Well if I were to try to understand this phrase that Jesus teaches I would begin (as I am about to actually do!) by going to Jesus' teaching elsewhere to see if his own teaching illustrates and illumines what he says in this particular passage. So if Jesus speaks about being "poor in spirit," are there any passages of scripture that you or I could think about, in which he expands and expounds on this strange phrase that he connects with happiness? I can think of a number of passages (e.g., Luke 16:19-31-the rich man and Lazarus; Luke 18:11 – the Pharisee praying) but

the one that I want us to think about and to refer to today is from one of Jesus' most famous stories. A story that we find in the 15th Chapter of Luke's gospel and we call it the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. The story of the Prodigal Son. For some of you it's well known, for others of you maybe not so well known.

It's the story of an adult son who wants from his father all the inheritance that he would normally get when his father dies. Of course, we and others may "think about" getting an inheritance when someone we love dies, but this young man didn't just "think about it" – he actually went to his father as if to say "Let's assume you are dead. That is, I wish you were dead – so what about giving me my inheritance now?" How galling is that? How arrogant? How unloving? How outrageous is that? How much the opposite of *poor in spirit* is that?

What gall! But the father gives it to him anyway! And in the story the son takes what he has been given by his father. He goes off far away from home and he squanders it until he becomes poor. He's in absolute poverty. He has absolutely nothing. He is poor but he is not yet *poor in spirit*. He has to do something for a living, so he finds work on a farm and he is taking care of pigs which means that he is certainly not in the land of Israel where this would be unclean (he's far from home "geographically") and if he's Jewish as he probably is, he is finding himself now working in a place where he would never ever go (he's far from home "spiritually") – as far from God as you could possibly be. And he was so hungry that Jesus tells us, he was willing to eat even what was given to the pigs. He is poor but he is still not *poor in spirit*. He is "poor me," no doubt: filled with self-pity but he is not yet *poor in spirit*.

He is not *poor in spirit* . . . until Jesus says something about a wonderful transition which takes place in his life. Jesus says in the story that this young man "comes to his senses"; something twigs in his mind. And what twigs in his mind is this – that in his helplessness, in his powerlessness he is not stuck. There is in fact somebody to whom he can turn for help. In order to do that he has to be so *poor in spirit* that he buries his pride – because the person who can help him is his father – the person he has wished to be dead! And he thinks about this, and in his *poverty of spirit* he not only thinks about it, but he picks himself up from where he is and heads back home to his father, the one who can help him.

To be *poor in spirit* in this story, at least (and as Jesus teaches elsewhere as well) is to have this realization that by ourselves we cannot make it on our own. We need help. And there is help to be found even if at first we cannot find it; even if we have to eat humble pie to find it. To be *poor in spirit* is to seek that help, and, wherever it is, to grab it so that our lives can be the lives God wants our lives to be. Poor in spirit – *You know you cannot go it alone, you know you are in need of help, you know you need to change and you're willing to seek the help no matter what the cost to get it.*

We see this illustrated more clearly than just about anywhere else in our own society in an organization like Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization based on Christian principles. Some of you may be involved in Alcoholics Anonymous personally, but involved or not, all of us know the power within that organization to change, to transform, lives. The first three steps of the 12-step program are as good a description of what it means to be *poor in spirit* as you can find.

- Step 1 we admitted that we were powerless over our problem, that our lives had become unmanageable;
- Step 2 we came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity;
- Step 3 made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

We made a decision. That is, we actually acted on what was happening to us. We weren't just *poor*; we weren't just '*poor me'*; we were *poor enough in spirit* to do something about it, to seek the power and help that was there, and was available.

This is surely what Jesus has in mind later on in the Sermon on the Mount when he speaks, for example, in terms of the Kingdom of Heaven being a "narrow gate" (Matt.7:13): those who are *not poor in spirit* come to God and say "This is how I want to live in order to please you. Why don't you accept me on my terms?" But Jesus says that it's the one who sees the narrow gate and says, "Lord, your path may or may not be the path I want to go on, but if that's the path you recommend, and it goes through that narrow gate, then that's what I'll do." It takes *poverty of spirit* to say that.

Or, when in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks about prayer (Matt.7:7-11). He says "Ask and seek and knock" in prayer. And he says, "If you do that you'll get your answer." But to do that, to ask and seek and knock, you see, is to be *poor in spirit*. It's to acknowledge our need of help, our helplessness without God. Sometimes we pray at only those occasional moments we all have, when we feel *poor in spirit*: we know we're at the end of our rope; but, then shortly afterwards, we no longer pray! Back to normal! But what Jesus is saying is that the sense of *poverty of spirit* must be ours *always*: we are always in need of the help that only God can give and we are to batter down the door of the Kingdom of Heaven (ask, seek, batter down!!) with our prayers until we get it in, and our father gives us what we need.

This is why Jesus in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount surely also speaks about the "Golden Rule": do to others as you would have them do to you (Matt.7:12). The come to see that life is not about *getting* what we want; happiness is not about getting what we want. There is some pleasure in that; of course there is – the material world was created by God and it was created good. But as the foundation of happiness? No *the poor in spirit* are those persons who sees that happiness comes from *giving* where we can. As if to say, "But I'm on empty Lord. I've got nothing to give! And God says "*Good!! Let me fill you, let me fill you so that my infilling will overflow from you to others; where you have nothing to give I have much to give. Be poor enough in spirit to ask me to fill you, so that you can 'do to others as you would have them do to you.*' When we "get" that, says Jesus, when we receive the help we need, then we will also come

to know that we belong to the king himself, and to his realm, the Kingdom of Heaven, and we will also find that sense of happiness that nothing can take away from us.

This is something that the great 17th Century Dutch artist Rembrandt came to see but only through many trials and tribulations. The late Henry Nouwen wrote of Rembrandt like this in his book called *The Return of the Prodigal* (1994, pp.30-33). He says this:

> "When I look at the profoundly interiorized self-portraits which Rembrandt produced during his last years and which explain much of his ability to paint the luminous old father in *The Return of the Prodigal,* we must not forget that as a young man Rembrandt had all the characteristics of the Prodigal Son himself: brash self-confidence, spendthrift, sensual and very arrogant. The self-portraits painted during his late 20s and early 30s reveal Rembrandt as a man hungry for fame and adulation, fond of extravagant costumes, preferring golden chains to the traditional starched white collars and sporting outlandish hats, berets, helmets and turbans. At the age of 30 he painted himself with his wife Saskia as the lost son in a brothel. No interiority is visible there. Drunk with his half open mouth and sexually greedy eyes he glares scornfully at those who look at his portrait as if to say "Isn't this a lot of fun?" [DR: Isn't this where happiness is to be found].
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> Gazing intently at the sensuous self portrait of the young Rembrandt as the Prodigal Son, I can scarcely believe that this is the same man who 30 years later painted himself with eyes that penetrate so deeply into the hidden mysteries of life. However, this short period of success, popularity and wealth is followed by much grief, misfortune and disaster. Trying to summarize the many misfortunes of Rembrandt's life can be overwhelming. They are not unlike those of the Prodigal Son.
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> After having lost his son in 1635 his first daughter in 1638, his second daughter in 1640, Rembrandt's wife Saskia whom he deeply loved and admired dies in 1642.
>
> Rembrandt is left behind with his nine month old son Titus.
>
> During these years also Rembrandt's popularity as a painter plummeted.
>
> His financial problems became so severe that in 1656 Rembrandt is declared insolvent.
>
> All of Rembrandt's possessions are sold in three auctions during 1657 and 1658, his house, everything in it.
>
> Although Rembrandt would never become completely free of debt and debtors, in his early 50s, at last he is able to now find a modicum of peace. The increasing warmth and interiority of his paintings during this period show that the many disillusionments did not embitter him. On the contrary they had a purifying effect on his way of seeing."

Jack Rosenberg writes, "*He began to regard man and nature with an even more penetrating eye, no longer distracted by outward splendor or theatrical display*."

> As I look he says now in the painting of the Prodigal Son kneeling before his father and pressing his face against his chest, I cannot but see there the once so self-confident and venerated artist who has come to the painful realization that all the glory that he had gathered for himself proved to be vainglory. Instead of the rich garments with which a youthful Rembrandt painted himself in the brothel he now wears only a torn under-tunic covering his emaciated body. And the sandals in which he had walked so far have become worn out and useless.
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> Moving my eyes from the repentant son to the compassionate father in his painting, I see that the glittering light reflecting from the golden chains, harnesses, helmets, candles and hidden lamps has died out. And we see [I paraphrase Nouwen here] the movement from the glory and seduction of wealth and popularity to the glory that is hidden in the human soul and that surpasses death. That is, "We see the movement from the happiness that comes from wealth and popularity become the happiness which is hidden in the human soul and that surpasses death."

A hard road. A narrow road. There's no naïvety about the reality of the world in Rembrandt anymore. But Rembrandt now knows that he is *poor in spirit*, and because of that he, paradoxically, is happier than he has ever been. And he knows he is a member, a member of that kingdom which can never fail, not just when he dies, but right here and now under the lordship and the rule of his king, King Jesus, who seeks your happiness and mine.

"Happy," says Jesus, "are the poor in spirit"— those who are *poor enough in spirit* to know that they are too weak to help themselves.

"Happy," says Jesus, "are the poor in spirit — those who are *poor enough in spirit* to humble themselves, to eat humble pie, to bury their pride, to get whatever help they need in order to change their circumstances.

"Happy," says Jesus, "are the poor in spirit — *poor enough in spirit* to take action and to seek and find it when they need it . . . Happy enough to know they belong, even in their poverty, to a king who will never, ever, let them go; and to a kingdom which knows no end, in which there are more than enough resources to meet us where we are, and to take us into the arms of God, where God wants us to be forever.

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