

“Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit”
Micah 6:1–8; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31; Matthew 5:1–12
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In his book *The Imitation of Christ* fifteenth-century German-Dutch theologian Thomas a Kempis said, “The highest and most profitable learning is this: that a man have a truthful knowledge and full despising of himself.” In his book *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing* nineteenth-century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard put it this way, “One should be able to tell the age of a tree from its bark; in truth one can also tell a man’s age in the Good by the intensity of his repentance.” A Yiddish proverb put it like this, “Better a sinner who knows he is a sinner than a saint who knows he is a saint.”

They are three ways of saying the same thing — humility is a valued human quality. There is nothing quite so irritating as an arrogant, self-righteous person who sees no fault within him/herself. On the other hand, there is nothing that will endear a person to us more rapidly than a humble awareness of limitations. Better a sinner who knows she is a sinner than a saint who knows she is a saint.

It is a truth toward which all the texts we have read today point. The prophet Micah says that what God requires of sinful mortals like us is not an abundance of sacrifice but a willingness to do justice, seek kindness, and walk humbly with God. The Apostle Paul tells the church in Corinth that God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God’s strength is revealed in the cross. Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor, lowly, or humble in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The intent in all three texts is not to devalue human life, to say that we are worthless. We are beloved children of God, even with all our shortcomings. Nor is the purpose to inspire a kind of false self-deprecation that masquerades as piety. I think of the story about a rabbi who was moved to awe in worship and thus fell to his knees before the bema and cried out, “O God, before you, I am nothing, I am nothing!” Noticing the rabbi’s piety and

not to be outdone, the president of the synagogue fell to his knees before the bema and cried out, “O God, before you, I am nothing, I am nothing!” At this point, a member of the congregation from the back of the synagogue came forward, kneeled before the bema, and cried out, “O God, before you, I am nothing, I am nothing!” at which point the president lifted his head, looked at the rabbi and said, “Look at who thinks he is nothing!”

That is not what we are talking about. Genuine humility is an honest appraisal of self which faces squarely the frailties and flaws we all have, and in the context of our faith, recognizes our appropriate place before a holy and gracious God. Biblical scholar Megan Fullerton Strollo notes that the Hebrew word translated as “humbly” in the reading from Micah, *tsana*, can also be rendered as “reverently.” It points to a way of walking with God that is mindful of who God is and what God expects of us (www.workingpreacher.org). Micah’s admonition is to see ourselves as we are, to recognize our frailty and need for God.

But it is a difficult word for us to hear. Like the Rich Young Ruler who is asked to give away all his possessions, we are hit right where it hurts. We are taught from day one to be proud and self-assured, self-sufficient and in control. We like to feel competent and together about most things, including faith, and there is nothing wrong with confidence. We are not meant to be doormats. Furthermore, some people feel beaten down all their lives because of family dysfunction or cultural messages, such that their lifelong challenge is to develop any sense of self-worth.

But most of us have a different challenge, that of acknowledging our flaws. Jesus says that faith begins with our confession of inadequacy and need for God, with a poverty of spirit, but this never seems to come easy. Something must happen to get our attention, to shake us up, to humble us.

A physician in Louisville, Kentucky had such an experience several decades ago. Dana’s father had been scheduled for a surgical procedure and his surgeon was an arrogant man who let his patients know just how important he was. They didn’t need second opinions, he had all the right answers, and he did not make mistakes... until Dan’s surgery. The mistake he made was that he forgot about the operation. He didn’t show up! I think he was on a golf course. Fortunately, another surgeon was available, given that the

anesthesiologist had already begun to medicate Dan, and everything went just fine for him.

The same could not be said of the original surgeon who had to deal with Dana's mother whom he had offended with his arrogance. I am not suggesting that Joann was a difficult person. She was one of my favorite people in the world, partly because she almost always took my side, but she was not a person you wanted to cross, even if you were a doctor. When the occasion arose, she told that forgetful surgeon he had been sent a message from God. He was fallible. He could make mistakes like everyone else. He was human. Most of all, he was replaceable.

It was a difficult lesson to learn but one we all have to learn. We are human, we are flawed, and sometimes, even when we think we are at our best, our spirits are impoverished. We need wake-up calls, gentle nudges, subtle reminders of our frailty. For especially when it comes to faith, it is easy to allow a good feeling about something to grow into arrogance which ultimately blocks our path to growth.

There is an Irish folk tale about a man who was considered to be very holy. He was the first to arrive at church every time the doors were open. One day he decided it would be a good thing for him to count the times he was in Mass. So, he got a big timber box, made a hole in it, and locked it so that no one could interfere with it. Then, every time he went to Mass, he put a pebble in the box.

As the years rolled by and the man grew old, he decided that he might need a new box. He called a servant boy to bring the old box, that he might open it, and he warned the boy the box would be heavy. To his surprise, the boy said the box was light as could be. The man opened it and found only five stones inside. He didn't understand.

So, he hurried to the parish priest who had an explanation. "It is like this, my good man," he said, "It was not about the Mass you were thinking, and it was not for your neighbors you were praying all the times you were at Mass, but all the time thinking about how pious you were, and how everyone should have great respect for you. That is a sign to you from Heaven, that you heard only five of the Masses properly, and that is the only five you will get credit for. Remember that, now, the next time you go to church (*Irish Folk Tales*, edited by Henry Glassie, p. 69)."

How easy it is to become proud about spiritual things, to view ourselves as pious because we come to church; or to view our status as Christians in an arrogant way, to assume that we are the only ones who could possibly know God. Wise people acknowledge that the more we learn about any subject — astronomy, subatomic particles, the human personality — the more we realize how little we know. If that is the case with learning about ordinary things, would it not be the case with God? How could we possibly know everything there is to know about God?

This is not to dismiss the distinctive claims of our faith. It is simply to acknowledge that we don't know it all. And when it comes to sharing our faith, this kind of humble awareness is much more persuasive than arrogance and certitude. We would be wise to adopt the spirit of the theology professor who begins all lectures with the statement, "About this, I may be wrong."

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." Blessed are the ones who remember their vulnerability and walk humbly with God. Blessed are the ones who do not allow pride to overcome them but recognize their limitations and need for God. It is a difficult word to hear, but Jesus says this is where faith begins, and the truth is this just makes sense. God can help us most when we are humble. We are teachable when we know we have something to learn, but when we think we know all there is to know, we are closed off to further revelation.

I have heard it said that you can tell a teenager, but can't tell them much. While this might have truth in it, adolescence is the age of spiritual awakening, asking questions, testing out what adults have told us is true. And I have known many people in their forties, fifties, sixties and on into their nineties who have stopped learning. And then, I have known people like Elmo Scoggin and Gerri Harris, who at the end of their journeys, one at 96 and the other 107, were still learning every day.

There is always more we can learn about anything in life, no matter how old we are, and there is always more we can learn about God, no matter how long we have been in church. Blessed are the poor in spirit, says Jesus, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The question is — what is this kingdom of heaven? People often think of it as a future reality, and our faith does offer hope for eternity, something

more than this life. But as we said last week, the kingdom or realm of God is simply life lived according to God's design.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we pray. The kingdom is the doing of God's will and while this enterprise will be complete in the future, it begins now. It involves our submission to God's sovereignty. So, the reward for our humility is the capacity to submit to God's will, to live according to Jesus' impossible yet marvelous teachings, to embody the other beatitudes.

Those who are poor in spirit will put aside false independence, misplaced aggression, half-hearted commitment, war, and cowardice. Those who have yielded to God's reign will mourn but also be comforted. They will become the meek who inherit the earth. They will hunger and thirst for righteousness and be satisfied. They will become pure in heart and see God. They will become peacemakers and thus, children of God. They will stand up for their faith, even when persecution awaits, and thus, enter the kingdom of heaven. In short, those who recognize their need for God will receive God's help in living the kind of life that is full and rich and complete.

In his book *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* Henry Fairlie notes that when Dante encounters the proud in purgatory, they each carry the crushing weight of a huge stone that bends them double and renders them incapable of lifting their eyes from the ground (p. 42). As they looked down at everyone in life, they are now unable to look up at anything. Fairlie goes on to note that C.S. Lewis said those who look down all the time will not be able to look up and see God.

But those who are humble, who are poor in spirit, can not only look up and see God, they can see their brothers and sisters, and themselves as they really are. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," says Jesus, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Indeed, it is.