

July 4, 2021

“Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 5:1-11

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It seems like it's not in vogue for many these days to profess one's patriotism. Patriotism, especially regarding certain hot button issues of the day, has been usurped by partisanship. Well, for me, I take a different view, especially today, on July 4th, as we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence by our Founding Fathers.

So let's talk about them for a brief moment. Just that term in itself, founding fathers, might rile some feathers as being sexist. What about Abigail Adams or Dolly Madison? But the fact is, only men signed the Declaration of Independence. And today these men – the founders like John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington and many more, are depicted these days as either heroic icons or despicable villains, all that is right or all that is wrong with American society.¹ And yes, many owned slaves, doing little to abolish the practice, and they dismissed out of hand all the issues surrounding the Native American population. So no, they weren't perfect... but I brought along a rock for anyone here today who is perfect, to throw the first stone.

On the other hand, to their credit, this is what they did: they created the first nation state of consequence in the history of the world that established a government controlled by its citizenry rather than by a monarchy or dictatorship; they allowed free enterprise to flourish with the result being economic growth never before realized in the history of the world; and they guaranteed us a Bill of Rights, which includes freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and principles that all citizens are equal before the law.

Apparently this formula has become so popular over the centuries that it is now the preferred political system in the modern world, overcoming European monarchies of the 19th century, and the totalitarian regimes of Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union and others in the 20th century. I think that's a lot for us to be grateful for as we sit here in freedom and prosperity. And Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of America's greatest writers as well as a philosopher and a staunch abolitionist, used his literary wit to caution future generations of Americans to avoid being too critical of the founders. “They had the incalculable advantage,” Emerson observed, “of apparently being 'present at the creation' and thus seeing God 'face to face.' All who come after, would only hear of (God) secondhand.” And although it was two hundred

¹ Founding Fathers, Joseph Ellis

and forty-five years ago when they wrote and signed the Declaration of Independence, I think it is still important for us to remember and hear again those famous words, *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”*

And isn't it true that a desire for happiness is something we all want. We want to live in a democracy, to live in peace and freedom, have a home and a job, to grow a family, to educate our children, to be able to worship as we please, to live the American dream with all its opportunities. And I pray this dream can become a reality for all, especially for those who are marginalized by the prejudices and injustices that still exist. But as good as all that may be, there's much more to consider. Because keep in mind – before we were citizens of the United States – before we had a birth certificate or Social Security number or passport, we were, as the Apostle Paul said, “citizens...of the household of God.” And in the beatitudes we heard today, Jesus tells us how we can have genuine happiness that goes beyond pursuing it here on earth. I'm sure you noticed – each beatitude begins, “Blessed are...” And this word, “blessed,” that we find in our English Bible, comes from a Greek word meaning happy, well-off, full of joy. One biblical expert commented that saying “blessed” is like saying, “O the bliss! O the happiness!” And so the beatitudes are really a recipe for our happiness. You see, in the beatitudes, Jesus is offering us a happiness that has nothing to do with our external situations or our circumstances. The beatitudes are a recipe for happiness because they are really about our attitudes. What's inside us. What we're made of. And if we would only “be” the “attitude” Jesus describes, then we could find true happiness...within. Where no person and no thing can come in and destroy it or ruin it or take it away.

So today, let's look at the first beatitude. “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” O the happiness of those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now my guess is that most of us may be confused by this beatitude. Because first off, we don't like the word poor. The word poor conjures up images of depravation and desperation. Yet there he is telling us, “Blessed are the poor,” and “in spirit,” as well. Spirit is something we should be rich in, don't you think? We look at sports teams and their fans, and say they have a rousing team spirit, a spirit to be champions. We think of racehorses having an unbridled spirit. We talk about people who have fought cancer and won the battle as having a strong and indomitable spirit. Spirit is something we should have an abundance of. So just what is Jesus' meaning here?

Well, this beatitude is really about the virtue of humility. Let me rephrase it this way: "Blessed are those who are humble, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Now why is this so important to Jesus? Well, consider that every day we face a world out there where battles of one sort or another, both big and small, are being fought. And our natural defensive mechanism is to protect and look out, first and foremost, for number one. We don't want to appear weak or vulnerable, so we allow our egos, our pridefulness... our natural spirit, so to speak, to take control of how we react. And this can bring out the very worst in us. For how can we ever love our neighbors if we allow our pride or arrogance to put up a wall of indifference between us. We can't. So what Jesus is saying is that it is better to be poor in spirit. Because when we are poor in spirit – humble, we act differently, we view the world differently, and we are better able to relate with what others... our neighbors... are going through and what they feel and what they need. We are better able to do God's work in the world. So being poor in spirit means we are rich in humility, which actually is a strength and a blessing.

But the fact is, as we all know, humility is a hard virtue to achieve. So how might we grasp it? Well, the only real way to attain this virtue is by acknowledging our dependence on God. In fact, this very first beatitude is what Jesus might call his "Declaration of Dependence." Total dependence on God. For God has given us everything we have – our intellect, our resources, our talents, our strengths. The truth is, we have nothing and we are nothing without God. And the person who is poor in spirit acknowledges this. That person acknowledges the power and greatness of God. And that person also acknowledges that he or she is often sinful, often misguided, and that ultimately he or she needs God. And think about that for a moment. Wouldn't you want to see yourself as poor in spirit before God?

Because have you ever said, "God, I need your help!" Then blessed are you because you've come to the One who promises us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." Have you ever said, "God there's no way I can get through this?" Then blessed are you because you've come to the One about whom St. Paul said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Have you ever said, "God, this is impossible?" Then blessed are you, because you've come to the One about whom Jesus said, "With God all things are possible." Have you ever said, "God, I can't find any peace?" Then blessed are you because you've come to the One who promises a "peace that passes all understanding." Have you ever said, "God, I have so many troubles in my life?" Then blessed are you, because you've come to the One who said, "Trust in me... (for) in this world you will have trouble, but take courage, for I have overcome the world." Have you ever said, "God, I feel so

alone!” Then blessed are you, because you’ve come to the One who said, “Know that I am with you always; yes, even to the end of time.”

Yes, humility, dependence is a difficult concept to grasp and even more difficult to embrace. We resist wanting to be “poor in spirit” – it seems to go against our natural desire for happiness. But in this beatitude, Jesus offers us true happiness because he leads us to true holiness. I once read, “A desire for happiness is natural.” (Thus - the Declaration of Independence.) “But a desire for holiness is supernatural.” So on this day, as citizens of the United States of America, let us celebrate our Declaration of Independence. But as citizens of the household of God, let us celebrate our Declaration of Dependence. Because as our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Amen.