

...at the end of your rope. A sermon preached at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, February 18, 2018 by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: MICAH 6:6-8

MATTHEW 5:1-12

Consider this morning's bulletin graphic.

Everything in this picture invites us to stillness and meditation.

The figures are immobile

The landscape is completely flat and unpeopled.

There is no movement at all – except for the barely visible birds in the distant sky

...slightly to the right of the bowed head of the woman

Time almost seems to stand still does it not?

The man and woman have stopped their field work – the shovel is in the ground to the left of the man

The idle wheelbarrow just behind the woman.

In larger copies of the picture – the bundle at their feet is a basket of potatoes.

The couples' heads are bowed

Each pair of hands in a reverent position.

In the background to the right of the woman, there is a small church – it's steeple the only thing dotting the horizon

It is evening.

The painting is titled The Angelus and it was painted by French artist Jean Francois Millet between 1857-1859.

Millet is often called the 'peasant painter'. For he was born into this world of the hardships of working the land.

The Angelus is a 13th c prayer, still in use within the Catholic Church.

Traditionally it was 3 times a day – dawn, noon and dusk.

It is a prayer based upon the account from Luke's gospel about the visitation of Mary by the angel Gabriel.

Each time the Angelus was prayed, the call to prayer was heralded by the ringing of church bells. The bells were a prompt for the people not only to stop their activities but to respond with the Angelus prayer.

A prayer that acknowledges and thanks God for the saving work of Christ.

Copies of the prayer both in English and what this couple would have recited – Latin-- is available on the table just outside the doors of the sanctuary.

This morning,
We begin a series of messages on the Beatitudes which begin Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes like Ecclesiastes 3 for **everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...**

Are familiar pieces of scripture
Therein lays the danger.

We think because we know these Beatitudes so well – we really know what they say, of what they are asking of us and what they demand from us.

For in these verses,
Refreshingly absent of clichés, platitudes or churchy buzz words,
Jesus is outlining to ALL his followers – you want to follow me,
You say you will trust and obey me –
Then this is what it means!!

They are so simple sounding and easy to read – yes?

Yet to put into practice each beatitude means a radical rearrangement of our ordinary every day value system.

Each Beatitude dares us to be different – to be what the late English Bible teacher and preacher, John Stott said – dare to be counter cultural!!

And this is a link to Millet's The Angelus.
To be serious,
To get serious about the practice of the Beatitudes we have to slow down,
Even stop for a time to pray – to listen to God,

To ask Him to help you put into practice that the
 Beatitudes are instructing all of us to do
 To hear in our heads,
 A bell, calling to us stop, pray, give thanks to God
 Stop and pray?????

Herb...get serious

Most days I have miles to go before I sleep
 I have kids, a job, family, a dog who need me
 I have responsibilities, deadlines, and goals
 I already wonder how I can accomplish all of these
 and you are calling me (us) to stop and pray?
 Precisely!!

Easy for you someone once said to me – you get
 paid to pray!!

While prayer is crucial to the calling to be a
 parish ministry and must undergird everything I
 do, my life has never been more or less busy than
 many of yours

And remember, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not
 addressed to the religious elite.

In fact the religious elite of Jesus' day took offence
 at Jesus' word

No the whole Sermon on the Mount and
 every one of Jesus' teachings was meant to be
 practiced by every and ALL believers,
 All who said, 'Lead me Lord, and I will follow.

Before we begin with prayerful reflection on
 the first Beatitude,
 A couple of observational reminders.

First, the Beatitudes are a complete whole.
 One cannot pick and choose which to practice.
 Second, one of them refers to what we may call a natural tendency.

Each is a product of God's grace and the operation of the Holy Spirit within us.

The blessings referred to are both present and future.

Note too that Jesus begins not with the failings and shortcomings of his listeners

But with the word "blessed"

This is not works based teaching – the more you DO the greater your rewards.

Rather it is a call and challenge to draw more,

Depend more on God and His grace and mercy.

Ring the bell

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (vs. 4)

Slow down, stop and pray....

To what is Jesus calling his listeners then and to us today?

Well, this is NOT a call or a commendation to voluntary poverty

I know there are those who justify voluntary poverty from the parallel passage in Luke 6:20 where we read **Blessed are the poor** without any mention of "in spirit."

One problem among many with using this as a justification is that nowhere in scripture is poverty taught at a good thing.

Poor people are not necessarily nearer to the kingdom of heaven than rich people

There is no merit or advantage to being poor. Poor does not guarantee spirituality.

To come back to Luke 6, if one carefully reads the whole paragraph and not just vs 20, it is clear I think that Jesus was speaking of the 'poor' in the sense of not being possessed by a worldly spirit. Poor in the sense that you do not RELY on riches.

What Jesus is concerned about is the spirit – *it is poverty of spirit.*

Rea – it is not having a heightened sense of your own importance.

It is that place, realization, season in our individual lives where there is an absence of well-polished pride and personal conceit.

In their place, there is a *wholesome dependence upon the living God*

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly; wash my savior or I die,*

Toplady's language is 19th, but the point is that we learn to depend more and more upon God in all things and at all times,

We will never experience or know what it is like to be **poor in spirit**

And the Kingdom of heaven will forever elude us!

John Calvin,

In his commentary on this particular verse is quite blunt

He only who is reduced too nothing in himself and relies on the name of God is poor in spirit.

This is an approach to the whole of life that we cannot produce in and maintain in and of our own strength, wits or charm.

This poverty of spirit is not a genetic trait

Nor something only certain people of certain ethnic, family, class, educational or colour have
In fact in a lot of cases, poverty in spirit can be forgotten with great wealth or much education.

Do you see and hear what Jesus is saying?

The kingdom of heaven,

Life with Jesus really means *utter dependence upon Him and his grace and mercy.*

That is so against the voices around us is it not?

Counter cultural this poor in spirit.

Poor in spirit means that it is not all about me, or us

It is not all about watch me,

Look at me

It is about God – it is about getting to that point and maintaining that stance that everything we have

Everything we are

Everything we have been given – ultimately comes back to God’s mercy, grace and lavish generosity – EVERYTHING!

Our world certainly does not operate on that perspective does it – it’s bad for business.

Our world operates for the most part on “what is in it for me?

Looking good at any and all costs!

I’m right – because I just could not be wrong

True empathy and compassion – that’s for someone else

Teachable spirit – why, I know this,. What can he/she/they teach me?

I remember years ago asking an individual, “would you consider yourself to be a humble person

He thought and considered the question for some time,

Then came his answer – “No, no Herb I don’t think I am....but I’d be proud to be one!”

The conversation moved in another direction.

I was brand new in parish ministry and I did not really know then how to best follow up his reply, for it was not an answer I was expecting.

What DO YOU say to such a response without causing personal offence?

Look,

Becoming poor in spirit as Jesus sees it will be the work of a lifetime

And it will only come with turning your dependence from yourself – being 'in self' to becoming more and more dependent upon God.

How do we accomplish such turning?

Some priming of the pump as it were...

Begin by examining your daily life.

Be honest with yourself – where do or have you seen pride – pure and simple – in operation in your life.

Rationalizing bad behaviour

Failing to both offer or accept forgiveness

Not paying attention to honest correction.

Believing that you are too old, too worldly, it's too late to change – pride is just who I am

Not acceptable – Blessed are the poor in spirit – there is no best before date is there....

Jesus is not asking us to become doormats to the world's feet – we'll come back to this when we get to vs 5 **Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.**

There is nothing doormatty or excuse me for living with either vs3 – Blessed are the poor in Spirit or verse 5--Blessed are the meek

This is a position of incredible inner strength and peace.

Pray—ask God to help you deal with your attitudes, approaches and words

“Lord, what would you have me do?”

I know what I would do or say...but is that what you would have me do or say in this situation to this person or these people?

Know that every day implementation of this and all the other Beatitudes take deliberate, intentional effort and energy from us.

For few of us are naturally humble—in fact, none of us are at the level of poor in spirit about which Jesus is talking—not initially.

Humility as Jesus sees it comes with age, experience and intentionality.

We need to rough edges of our personalities and reactions to things smoothed down

Do not beat yourself up when that insufferable pride of which all and any of us are capable suddenly rears up in speech, attitude or action!

Admit it has happened.

Confess and seek forgiveness from God and if at all possible the person(s) which have been the recipients or victims of your display of pride

And move forward, being reminded of fragile and easily overturned that poor in spirit characteristic of the Christian life is at times.

Make Toplady's hymn or some other hymn or scripture verse one of your spiritual barometers in examining your own life

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;*

This is not easy stuff.

None of the Beatitudes are "easy to practice"

They cost us – emotionally, time wise, maybe even financial and in terms of relationships with others.

With the Beatitudes, Jesus does not offer a list of trite, sentimental remarks designed to make everyone smile or just feel good about themselves.\

The Beatitudes are clear, no nonsense words from Jesus

You want to call yourself one of my followers he is saying,

Then hang on – for this is only one of my demands

Blessed ARE the poor in spirit, for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven. (vs. 3)