

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 26, 2023

The First Sunday in Lent

Solemn Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Gina Gore, *Chaplain of the Cathedral School at Saint John the Divine*

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“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Tonight I have the pleasure of exploring the first Beatitude with you in this Lenten series. I was struck by a reflection that the rector shared with this community on February 11th in his weekly email newsletter. He shared that a parishioner said she felt that the Beatitudes were harder to live by than the 10 Commandments! When I read that I took pause, wondering, what are the Beatitudes actually calling us to do, if they in fact are, and how might we find a manageable path to do so?

It’s important to note that the Beatitudes are not heaven’s entrance requirements, per se. Jesus is not asking the crowds to become poor in spirit (it is not imperative), rather he is offering consolation to those who are poor in spirit. The Beatitudes are bold statements with promises, assurances. They stand to bring peace and freedom to all whom they touch. Today, I’ll speak only on the first one, and I invite you to the coming weeks of this Lenten series to hear how other preachers will consider these promises, and our role in them.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This was a message delivered on a mountaintop, to the disciples whom Jesus commissioned, and an audience of followers, including the elite Jewish establishment. Jesus was sharing a message of God’s blessings with *the vision of a world in which all undervalued persons would be valued as human beings, would be seen, heard, and loved.* This is directly in line with our baptismal covenant: to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. “With God’s help,” oh, what a world that could be!

Lent is a season of invitation. We do the inviting: we invite God to create and make in us new and penitent hearts. And we’re invited in to a holy Lent through intentional self reflection, repentance, and more. And here we are. So, let’s consider what this first Beatitude says to us today, and how it shows us the necessity for grace, moves us into a deeper knowledge and love of God, and invites us to respond. One path I’ve found that I really like, and I hope may resonate with you as well offers us 3 responses to the Beatitudes: simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion.

1 - Simplicity

This asks that we consider the words themselves. This gives us a chance to just break it down, word by word. Maybe we can hear the words with fresh ears, and be open to a new perspective.

Blessed are the poor in spirit

Luke’s Gospel says Blessed are you who are *poor*. Matthew’s Gospel, which is used today, adds ‘in spirit’. Commentaries suggest that ‘poor’ alone was speaking to the pious, the Israelites who were poor but pious, and that perhaps by adding ‘in spirit,’ Matthew was intending that this speak to those who are so low that they’ve *lost* faith. We know that God sides with those who feel that way, the weak, the forgotten. The poor in

spirit includes all who are downtrodden: the oppressed, crushed, enslaved, depressed, burdened, exploited, bullied, powerless, helpless, abused, hopeless, even spiritually poor. One translation I found said, "Blessed are those who are at the end of their rope." We know them, they are in our families, they are our neighbors and friends, we work with them, we walk by them on our city streets, we hear about them, we read about them, every day, near and far,

... we *are* them. Those who are poor in spirit may or may not outwardly appear so, but inwardly, probably feel very less than. Blessed are the poor in spirit. The Good News is that God's divine favor is bestowed upon all who identify here.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Kingdom of heaven. What is the kingdom of heaven? To Jesus, it is not so much a goal to be attained or a place, but (and I'll refer to Luke 17:20-21 here): "Upon being asked by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God was to come, he answered, The Kingdom of God comes unmatched by men's

eyes, there will be no saying, See, it is here, or See, it is there; the kingdom of God is here, within you." Is this kingdom of heaven a place in us where God's pure love and hope lives? Is it only God who gives this kingdom to the blessed, or are we somehow involved? I think, yes, we are involved, and we'll explore how so.

2 - Hopefulness

I think we know that when all outward signs point to hopelessness for a person, it can be very hard if not impossible for them to imagine receiving God's Blessing, or even to feel worthy of it. But they are, we are. All who are poor in spirit receive the gift of God's blessing, which I believe includes hope. But again, when you're extremely low, it can be hard to grasp hope. And when the hopeless are engulfed in shame, regret, failure and fear, hope can feel unreachable. That's where we come in. If we can lend God a hand in moving someone from hopelessness to hopefulness, then let's do just that. I think this is precisely the invitation that the first Beatitude is calling us into. Jesus offered hope to the hopeless. Jesus invites us to place our hope in him. When we root ourselves there, then we can extend hope to others. Is it our place? I think yes, it is our place. What might we do? I'm not sure, but we'll each figure it out. Will it matter? I think so. Will we try? I hope so. And when extending hope to others, let's consider thenecessity of grace involved. Let's try, this Lent, to gracefully extend hope to the hopeless.

3 - Compassion.

The 3rd concept is compassion. Compassion literally means to suffer together. When we witness another person's deep sadness and feel what that makes our hearts feel, feel the brokenness, will it motivate us to be helpful, forgiving, understanding, more loving? Might compassion also show us a necessity for grace, and ignite in us the desire to extend that grace to another person in whatever way we can? Could compassion compel us to substitute our judgment, our disdain, our incomprehension, for the poor in spirit with love? Henri Nouwen, beloved priest, professor, theologian and writer, describes compassion in this way: an inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust."

On Ash Wednesday we were poignantly reminded of that oneness. This season we are being made new. Let's ask ourselves, when we hear the Beatitudes, how might those who are blessed actually *feel* the gift they are promised? How is it that the poor in spirit will feel the kingdom of heaven? I believe that this gift depends, in part, on us! I imagine that God is

expecting us to extend the hope and love of the kingdom of heaven, here on earth, wherever and whenever we can.

The imagineer of these 3 concepts of simplicity, hopefulness and compassion is The Rev. Charles James Cook, priest, author & educator. Not someone I know, but someone whose work I've discovered. When we extends these 3 concepts to another person, he calls this Beatitude Living. Can we try on this Beatitude Living in Lent?

One person did this exceptionally well: Pauli Murray. In honor of Black History Month I take a moment to highlight the incredible heart of The Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray. She was born in 1910 in Baltimore, grew up in North Carolina in the segregated south and, throughout the many hardships of her life, was always trying to lift up the downtrodden. She was courageously ahead of her time: she led a lunch counter sit-in in Washington, D.C. 17 years before the famous Woolworth sit-in, she fought for bus seating rights 15 years before Rosa Parks. *Why have so many of us never heard of this incredible human being who never stopped striving for more education, more rights, more freedoms?* She was a staunch civil rights activist, graduated law school in 1944, went on to become the first African American to earn a Doctorate of Judicial Science from Yale in 1965, co-founded the National Organization for Women in 1966. Years after working as a lawyer Pauli felt her call to the priesthood, and in 1977

became the first African American woman ordained as an Episcopal priest. There is so much more to her inspiring life story, and I implore you to explore the website paulimurraycenter.com, and watch the documentary *My Name Is Pauli Murray*. In 2024 the U.S. Mint will release the American Women Quarter series, and Pauli will be honored on the United States quarter. Well deserved! Pauli truly embodied Beatitude Living.

Throughout this sermon I've used the phrase 'the necessity of grace' 5 times and here is why. New Testament scholar, historian and theologian Dale Allison, in the book *Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* suggests that the point of the sermon is to teach us the necessity of grace. That alone may be another path for us to embrace what the Beatitudes call us to do: consider the necessity of grace wherever we can. For anyone who may feel challenged by how to live into the Beatitudes, I hope this has made them more accessible.

May we strive for Beatitude Living.

May we be a part of God's blessings on the poor in spirit.

May they feel the kingdom of heaven in our hope, our compassion, our love, and our grace.

Amen.

Not preached:

This is poem by Pauli Murray that appears at the end of the documentary: "Give me a song of hope in a world where I can sing it. Give me a song of kindness. In a country where I can live it.

Give me a song of hope and love In a brown girl's heart to hear it."