

***A sermon preached on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 based upon Matthew 5:1-12 entitled,  
“Acknowledging our Poverty of Spirit.”***

In my 38 years of being a pastor, visiting and preaching in nursing homes has always been something I've done on a regular basis. Nursing homes can be rather depressing places, and I'm not looking forward to the possibility of one day finding myself living in one. Nonetheless, I have always appreciated the times I have spent there because of the receptivity I find in the people I meet there to my ministry. They tend to be the people of whom Jesus spoke in his beatitudes: “the poor in spirit”, empty, quite clear that they can't fix themselves. They are “the meek”, no longer looking to impress anybody. They are those who “mourn” the loss of their homes and their loved ones no longer present. They've given up the battle to come in first, and have space in their hearts for mercy. They are conscious of the fact that death awaits them in the not too distant future; and as such they long to “see God”.

There's a story involving visiting in a nursing home that I've told a couple of times before in sermons that has stayed with me for perhaps 35 years. I served two little country churches in Hunterdon County before I came to Parsippany, and once a month I would take my turn leading worship at the little nursing home down the road. It wasn't upscale; I don't remember them offering much rehab – basically just people waiting together for death to come.

I lived next door to one of the two churches I served, so this meant that on Sunday mornings I would get up and drive fifteen minutes to the other church where I would lead worship at 9 am, and right after that service was done and I had greeted everybody on their way out the door I would hop in my car and drive the fifteen minutes back to the other church, arriving just in time to begin worship service there. As you could imagine Sunday mornings could be kind of stressful.

On one particular Sunday for reasons I can't recall, and probably didn't fully understand by the time I finished the second service I felt utterly depleted and exhausted – not so much physically as spiritually. Feeling empty and sad I headed back to the parsonage and crawled into bed. I had no desire to interact with anyone. There was a problem though: I was scheduled that afternoon to go to the nursing home to lead a mid-afternoon service.

Leading worship requires energy. There is a kind of performance involved. It requires having something inside me to offer to those who take the trouble to show up and listen. And the one thing clear to me was that I didn't have such energy – I didn't have anything inside to offer anybody.

But I knew I had to go, and at some point I simply accepted the fact that I would go in the spirit of that old hymn we sang a couple of weeks ago: *“just as I am without one plea.”* There was a kind of letting go that took place – a sense of surrender.

I was one of the “poor in spirit” going to spend the afternoon in the company of some others who were also “poor in spirit.” There was no show for me to perform. I went in the simple awareness that we were all in this together.

This internal surrender slowed me down in a way that made me unusually present to the moment. I let go of the worry about what I would say or do beyond the present moment. I remember going around the room of mostly old ladies in wheel chairs, taking time to greet each one, looking into their eyes and clasping their hands. There was a real soul connection that took place. I was conscious of them being particularly beautiful – of a kind of light shining forth from them.

I spoke words -- words that not only they but also I needed to hear – the truths that I believe are at the heart of Jesus’ ministry -- that even when we can’t feel it, God’s love is the deepest reality of our lives. That we are cherished by the one who created us out of love and has knit us all together as one. That a place is prepared for us in the kingdom of heaven, and that afternoon that kingdom touched down for us in that nursing home.

I have preached in nursing homes literally hundreds of times since, and although I am always blessed in some way by the experience, to this day that experience was different than any other. Eternity touched time. Typically I come away from preaching in nursing homes with some degree of fatigue, but strangely that afternoon I came away feeling replenished. Those old ladies and I had feasted together on soul food.

In a few minutes we will share together the sacrament of Holy Communion. It occurred to me that there could have been some similarity between what I experienced that day in that nursing home and what took place on that night knowing he was about to die Jesus shared a last supper with his friends.

That night Jesus himself would have been one of the “poor in spirit” – exhausted, depleted, mourning the life he was leaving. The next day he would express his utter emptiness when he cried out on the cross, *“My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me.”*

Together in their shared poverty of spirit, the kingdom of heaven touched down in that upper room.

Let us acknowledge our poverty spirit, and in doing so may we also catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of heaven breaking forth here on earth.