

'Blessed are the Poor in Spirit'

All Saints Day 2011

"The poor in spirit are blessed, because the reign of heaven is theirs!"

(Transliterated from Greek)

Matthew 5:3

Fellow Saints in Christ,

Mark Twain once was asked if the Bible is hard for him to understand and Twain responded by saying that it was not the parts he couldn't understand in the Bible that bothered him as much as the parts of the Bible that he could understand. Some have read the words of Jesus from his 'sermon on the mount' and all they see is a 'to do 'list filled with impossible directives that no-one can ever hope to fulfill. For example, some believe Jesus wants us to be poor in spirit in order to be happy or, it is the lowly who will be blessed and they are the ones who will take over the earth, or only those have a strong passion for righteousness will be satisfied, and only those who are merciful will receive mercy, only the pure in heart will see God. And you better be a peacemaker. ...How you doing so far? Have you followed all these rules or directions in order to be blessed and have you been blessed? Have you met all the expectations of God? Are you poor enough? Have you spent enough time mourning? Are you lowly enough? Is your heart's desire and passion to be righteous all the time, most of time, or some of time? What exactly does Jesus want from us? When I look at my own life I fall short in so many of these areas! (Forgetting to take offering last Sunday.)

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus begins his teaching ministry as the reign of the incarnated Christ on earth begins! The major message of Jesus throughout the Gospels, what Jesus really wants from you is this, "Repent! For the reign of Heaven stands near!" This is the message of the Sermon on the Mount! The Christ, the Son of David, and the saving Son of God, ascends the mountain,

surrounded by crowds of followers and people, and with power and mercy Jesus begins his ministry of healing and teaching! Jesus opens his mouth and the words from God himself begin to form and roll over his tongue.

There are 9 beatitudes each of which begin with the word 'BLESSED' or 'saved' or 'redeemed' or 'happy' and the first people whom Jesus mentions as BLESSED are the *Poor in Spirit*. And this first 'beatitude' is the subject of my sermon today. The reign of heaven, with all its attendant gifts belongs to the poor in Spirit, RIGHT NOW, TODAY and not just in the future! The poor are those who receive the good news preached to them. When John the Baptizer sent his Disciples to ask Jesus 'if he was the one sent from God or should they look for another', Jesus answered them and said, "The blind are receiving sight and the lame are walking, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR have good news preached to them and BLESSED IS THE ONE who is not offended by me! "(It was the poor in spirit who were not offended.)

These were all signs that the reign of the King had begun. Those who are spiritually poor are receiving Good News! The spiritual poor are those who are spiritually destitute, without resources, without what one needs in the spiritual realm. Those who are spiritually poor cannot have their spiritual needs fulfilled on their own, by their own effort; they have made the effort in trying to keep the commandments of Moses but have failed miserably, they are in need of another, they are in need of a Messiah. They are like sheep who are lost and distressed or like sinners who need to be called and forgiven. Jesus opens his mouth and Jesus, as The Good Shepherd, HE embraces the poor in Spirit, HE embraces fallen human beings, HE embraces those who need and who want to hear Good News, Good News that is based not on human effort but on the salvation message of grace that can only come from the sacrificial Lamb of God! The reign of heaven is begun!

(ILLUSTRATION, see below.) The poor need good news, the poor are more likely to respond to good news, usually more so than those who are rich. The places where churches are growing are in the poor areas of the world where hope is lost, where there is nowhere to turn, where there is only Jesus. The rich easily compromise their values; they have much to do and choices to make in a world

which offers much in the way of temporary pleasure and self-absorption. Luther writes in his commentary, "If there is a greedy belly there, that man is called "spiritually rich"; on the other hand, he is called "spiritually poor" if he does not depend upon these things and can empty his heart of them." So many turn their hearts against Jesus or become Luke-Warm because they commit their hearts to that which is worldly and temporary. One can certainly understand the sadness of the rich young ruler who walked away from Jesus; it was his wealth that kept him from following Jesus. For the religious people it was their self-righteousness, their self-glory that kept them from believing in Jesus. But when Jesus called out to the poor, the sinners, the sick, the diseased, those who were spiritually bankrupt because of their sin, these are they who responded to the call of Christ! These were they that begged Jesus to save them! These are they who understood the words of Jesus when Jesus said "Can a blind man lead a blind man." Luke 6:37 When Jesus called you out of darkness to faith there were no conditions, no specifications, no limitations, just mercy, grace, and forgiveness. And those who responded to the call of grace, in their repentance worked by Jesus, these are they who Jesus calls blessed, because they ARE poor in Spirit, they ARE righteous, they ARE peacemakers, they ARE humble, they endure persecution, they ARE merciful, they are blessed because they ARE **IN** Christ.

Jesus fulfills prophecy spoken long ago by Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted."

This is the message of the cross that all the saints have carried with them down through the ages. It is a message of grace and hope that will one day bring all the Saints of God together, Saints whose robes have been washed by the blood of the lamb. And God will shelter us with his presence! The Lamb will guide us to springs of living water and there will be no more thirst, no scorching heat will burn them, and God wipe away every tear from our eyes. Alleluia!

All Saints Day reminds us that we are Saints. We are often told that we are sinners, we as Lutherans have that confession part down really well, the “I am a worm” part, but there is another side to the confession – there is absolution too. God today declares us righteous in the blood of Jesus, he declares us to be his children. Yes, I know that I am hopeless, but that is an evaluation made “pre-Christ.” The post-believing baptismal man is filled with hope – there is no enemy bigger than the Savior’s love for you and there is no problem which you and I cannot face with the help of our beloved Jesus. The English word “bless” comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word for “blood.” I am blessed today, because of the blood Jesus shed for me on the cross. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.” -EPH 1:7- there is no greater blood bought blessing then the forgiveness of sin.

Illus-Listen to this news clipping. “Gambling, robbery, sexual immorality, and violence is prevalent. Half of all children are born out of wedlock; purity and fidelity to the marriage vow are sneered out of fashion. Corruption in politics is rampant. The world is broken.” This news clipping is from 1694.

It was in this time that John Wesley began preaching to the poor, a message of new life through the free grace of Christ.