

Help of the Helpless
Matthew 5:3, Luke 18:9-17

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Here we are in the season of Lent and we know we are supposed to pray. This is a season of repentance, a time for giving up our sins and turning toward Jesus and the cross in preparation for Easter. But the truth is that it is already slipping by unnoticed, pushed out of mind by snowstorms and the ferry schedule. We are preoccupied by our own health concerns, by what's going to happen with the choir, by our lack of money, by frustration with Congress, by Haiti, by exes and crushes—and it's simply life as usual. So when we have a time of silence here in worship we are trying to calm ourselves down and make ourselves present to someone we haven't seen in a while. We are called to confess our sins, but we can't even do that effectively. We are so unaccustomed to looking at our lives from God's point of view that we have a hard time imagining how we have disappointed him, and our defenses against our critics have grown so strong that we cannot let them down to let ourselves in. We feel helpless to make ourselves spiritual. We can sit here doing our duty for an hour, but we have no sense that we are connecting. We are helpless, helpless, helpless.

Sometimes the church gives the impression that it is a place for people who have their act together. God is looking for a few good people who have their theology figured out and never suffer from doubt. Worship is supposed to be an expression of confidence and faith.

But Jesus has another word for us: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* This is not a command, as if Jesus was saying "Make yourself humble so you will deserve heaven." This is a blessing. Bless you who are destitute in your spirits. Bless you who have given up on your spiritual life. God blesses those who know they are too screwed up to be in church; they are the ones in whom God is beginning to rule. This is how the Sermon on the Mount begins, and this is how following Jesus starts: "I am not spiritually rich. I am bankrupt. I don't like the language, but I am one of those sinners, poor and needy, bruised and broken." The old hymn says *Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream; all that He requires of sinners is to turn and trust in Him.*

This is not like saying "I've been naughty." It's more like saying "There is something wrong with me and I don't even know what it is. There is something that keeps me from connecting with God." That is what it means to be poor in spirit, to know that you are poor when it comes to spiritual things. Jesus is pointing to something that is the opposite of saying "I've been born again. I'm all clean. My life has been changed. I have claimed my spiritual gifts and I am full of God's power." Jesus is talking about something more like powerlessness. Those who know they are powerless are the ones in whom God's kingdom is taking root. This is good news for the spiritual failures among us.

Jesus told a story in Luke 19 about two people who went to the temple to pray. It is presented as a parable, but it could just as well be a piece of observation of what was going on one day in the temple courts. The Pharisee comes to pray and believes he is already righteous; he thanks God for his blessings and that he has been saved; he thanks God that his life is so much better than criminals he hears about and the wicked who don't know God. The tax collector is a sold-out collaborator with the Romans who has lived for money. He comes to the temple and feels he is unworthy even to stand in God's presence or talk to him. He just prays, "God, have mercy on me. I'm so messed up. Help me." Which one left the temple right with God? The one who knew he was helpless and cast himself on God's mercy.

Can I translate that story into the present tense? One scholar [Crossan] suggested that the parable could be retold as a joke: "The pope and a pimp walk into a cathedral..." In the minds of Jesus listeners, the Pharisee would have been the good guy in the story and the shock value is in the fact that God listens to the bad guy. So let's make it the parable of "The deacon and the down-and-out." The deacon comes into church and sits on one of the front pews. His prayer is full of gratitude: "Thank you that I am a born-again Christian. Thank you that I know what the gospel really is even if most people on the island don't. Thank you for helping me to be a faithful church member and keeping me from falling into sin. Thank you for giving me spiritual gifts."

But on the back pew against the wall where no one can see him is the local homeless guy. Everybody knows his life is a failure. He's been in and out of rehab. He's been unable to keep a job. He's been sleeping in cars and on back porches and sometimes crawling in the window of the basement of this church. And he looks up at this stained glass window of Jesus and says, "Jesus, I am so screwed up. Please help me."

At the end of the story, Jesus asks, "Now which one of those two men really connected with God? It's the one who knows his *poverty* that God's kingdom is able to touch."

Alcoholics Anonymous says the First Step is "We acknowledge that we are powerless over alcohol." John Wesley said in a sermon centuries ago, "Poverty of spirit [is] the first step we take in running the race which is set before us, a just sense of our inward and outward sins, and of our guilt and helplessness." But it is not just that first step, something that happens at the time we experience conversion. It is the Christian life. "Poverty of spirit," he says, "begins where a sense of guilt and the wrath of God ends, and is a continual sense of our total dependence on him, for every good thought or word or work, and of our utter inability to do good unless he 'waters every moment,' an abhorrence of the praise of men, knowing that all praise is due to God only."

I never have any standing with God because I am better than someone else. Most of us are ingrained at an early age with sibling rivalry, and we think the way to get Mom to like me best is to tell on our siblings. I may not be perfect, but I'm better than they are. We come to God thinking that we can get somewhere by being, like all the children of Lake Wobegon, above average. But

Jesus is telling us that the only way to get anywhere with God is by depending on his mercy and not our own achievements.

I read this week in a little book of devotions on the Sermon on the Mount [http://www.cccnet.ca/Menu/Books/HH_SermonOnMount.pdf] by the late Pope Shenouda III—not a Roman pope but the leader of the Coptic Church in Egypt. I remember hearing him preach at Princeton Seminary when I was a student; I especially remember his entrance in all his finery, accompanied by a whole procession of Coptic officials. One of Shenouda's sentences in that book stopped me in my tracks: *The poor in spirit does not stand before God as a contestant.* The poor in spirit does not stand before God as a contestant. This is not a contest. There are no winners or losers. We are not better than or worse than. We are creatures who stand before our Creator and ask ourselves, "Who am I to stand before you and talk with you?"

One commentator renders Matthew 5:3 as "The Kingdom of God belongs to those who know they have no resources, material or spiritual, to help themselves before God" [Michael Wilkins, *NIV Application Commentary, Matthew*]. The hymn "Rock of Ages" says "Nothing in my hand I bring, only to Thy cross I cling." That is the spirit of Lent. That is repentance that connects us to God's mercy.

I want to read you a monologue from Generation X writer Douglas Coupland in a book called *Life After God* [Washington Square Press, 1995]. I want to read it because I can imagine it as the voice of so many people I know on Block Island, even though it is about growing up in suburban Vancouver.

The radio would be turned on, full of love songs and rock music; we believed in rock music but I don't think we believed in the love songs, either then or now. Ours was a life lived in paradise and thus it rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless. Politics, we supposed, existed elsewhere in a televised nonparadise; death was something similar to recycling.

Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of children of the children of the pioneers--life after God--a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven. Perhaps this is the finest thing to which we may aspire, the life of peace, the blurring between dream life and real life--and yet I find myself speaking these words with a sense of doubt. I think there was a trade-off somewhere along the line.

I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God.

But then I must remind myself we are living creatures--we have religious impulses--we must --and yet into what cracks do these impulses flow in a world without religion? It is something I think about every day. Sometimes I think it is the only thing I should be thinking about.

Some facts about me: I think I am a broken person. I seriously question the road my life has taken and I endlessly rehash the compromises I have made in my life. I have an unsecure and vaguely

crappy job with an amoral corporation so that I don't have to worry about money. I put up with halfway relationships so as not to have to worry about loneliness. I have lost the ability to recapture the purer feelings of my younger years in exchange for a streamlined narrow-mindedness that I assumed would propel me to "the top." What a joke.

Compromise is said to be the way of the world and yet I find myself feeling sick trying to accept what it has done to me: the little yellow pills, the lost sleep. But I don't think this is anything new in the world.

This is not to say my life is bad. I know it isn't...but my life is not what I expected it might have been when I was younger. Maybe you yourself deal with this issue better than me. Maybe you have been lucky enough to never have inner voices question you about your own path--or maybe you answered the questioning and came out on the other side. I don't feel sorry for myself in any way. I am merely coming to grips with what I know the world is truly like.

Sometimes I want to go to sleep and merge with the foggy world of dreams and not return to this, our real world. Sometimes I look back on my life and am surprised at the lack of kind things I have done. Sometimes I just feel that there must be another road that can be walked--away from this person I became--either against my will or by default.

Now--here is my secret:

I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God--that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

You may think that your sense of helplessness in your spiritual poverty keeps you from praying. Nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that only the helpless can pray. A Norwegian pastor named Ole Hallesby wrote a classic book called *Prayer* in 1931. I love his words:

Listen to this, you who are so often helpless that you do not know what to do. At times you do not even know how to pray. Your mind seems full of impurity. Your mind is preoccupied with what the Bible calls the world. God and eternal and holy things seem so distant and foreign to you that you feel you add sin to sin by desiring to approach God in such a state of mind....

Listen, my friend! Your helplessness is your best prayer. It calls from your heart to the heart of God with greater effect than all your uttered pleas. He hears it from the very moment that you are seized with helplessness, and He becomes actively engaged at once in hearing and answering the prayer of your helplessness. [Prayer, Augsburg, 1994, p.18-19].

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