

In the name of ✝ Jesus. Amen.

Last week we heard how Jesus was going about all of Galilee “*proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom,*” and we heard Jesus preach, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*”

Today we hear more of this kingdom preaching as Jesus ascends the mountain and opens His mouth to teach His disciples in, perhaps, the most famous sermon ever preached. We call it the Sermon on the Mount, and it begins with the well-known words we heard this morning: “*Blessed ...*” Jesus repeats this word, blessed, as a litany of His kingly reign. They are called the Beatitudes; they are the doorway into Jesus’ marvelous sermon.

Indeed, the Church has cherished these words of Jesus. She used to sing them as a canticle; I don’t remember singing them, but surely some Lutherans did for they were set to music in the LCMS’s *The Lutheran Hymnal* in our pews

Many of you may have memorized them. Rightly so. Jesus is teaching His disciples here. Matthew makes that clear when He tells us that Jesus sat down to teach. And Matthew writes this gospel to make sure that Jesus continues to teach His church, that is, us, His disciples who follow after Him still.

“*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*” Jesus begins His sermon. He is talking about Himself in the first instance, for here sat the very Son of God in all His humility. Here sat the king of heaven, who though very God, “*did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.*” In humility, He “*emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*” (Phil. 2:6-7). The almighty Son became foolish and weak and low and poor in His incarnation (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

And even more so by His suffering and death, for the immortal Son of God submitted Himself to mortality. Yes, He “*humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil. 2:8). Here Jesus shows Himself not only to be the One “*poor in spirit,*” but also the One “*persecuted for righteousness’ sake.*” Truly Jesus was the One subjected to “*hostility and ill-treatment*” for who He was. He was despised and rejected. He was oppressed and afflicted. He was pierced and crushed—the guiltless punished for the guilty.

Yet, it is precisely there, on the cross, that we find God’s wisdom and power—and Jesus’ nobility. It is precisely there, on the cross, that we hear Jesus unexpectedly promise His kingdom to a sinner and His fellow condemned: “*‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise’*” (Luke 23:42-43).

Oh, how difficult this is to hear, how contrary to the spirit of our times is this message of the Gospel. What a loser Jesus seems—and yet He is the victor. By His death Jesus not only defeats sin and overcomes death, but He destroys him “*who has the power of death, that is, the devil*” (Heb. 2:14).

And as much as the message of Christ crucified is contrary to the spirit of the times, so Jesus’ preaching in the Beatitudes contradicts this *Zeitgeist*. You can see it. The culture and media of today have got it all backward. They call losers those whom Jesus declares winners, and vice versa. For “the world exalts wealth, power, glamor and influence,” but our “Lord commends humility, meekness, mercy, purity, [and] generosity” according to His own example ([earlychurchfathers.wordpress.com/tag/beatitudes/](http://earlychurchfathers.wordpress.com/tag/beatitudes/))

And so, what Jesus says about Himself today, He says to the church: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,*” and “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

This blessedness is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Yours IS the kingdom of heaven. You live now under the reign of Christ in His kingdom. I reminded you of this last week, but it bears repeating: remember “*God’s kingdom comes when He gives us His Holy Spirit, so that, by His grace, we believe His holy word, and lead Godly lives*” (Luther’s Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, 3<sup>rd</sup> Petition)

Of course, Jesus here does not mention faith at all, and yet, I submit that faith in Christ Jesus permeates all of these Beatitudes, starting with the “*poor in spirit.*” It’s not a faith in some temporal “best life now” or of a “claimed material prosperity”—what the world calls winning, but a faith in the promise that “*if we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him*” (2. Tim. 2:11-12).

And doesn’t that imply a poverty of spirit? A humility that truly marks the life of a Christian? Jesus reminds us, “*everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted*” (Luke 18:14). St. Peter exhorts us, “*Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’*” (1 Pet. 5:5). In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Micah instructs us as to what the Lord says is good, and it has nothing to do with mammon or power or wisdom Rather it’s “*to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*” (Micah 6:8). Thus, Luther, too, reminds us that “the entire life of believers [should be] one of repentance,” and he points to Christ’s words before us today as part of his proof of this first of his famous 95 theses.

Truly, when Jesus says “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,*” He’s not talking about those who boast in their works, in their “*burnt offerings, with calves a year old,*” in their “*thousands of rams, [and their] ten thousands of rivers of oil.*” He’s not asking for your “*firstborn for [your] transgression, the fruit of [your] body for the sin of [your] soul*” (Micah 6:6-7). He’s calling true disciples to bow their heads and beat their breasts and cry out, “*be merciful to me, a sinner*” that we may go home justified (Luke 18:13-14). For “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart*” God “*will not despise*” (Psalm 51:17).

When Jesus says, “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,*” He’s talking about those believers who endure in the faith, for He reminds us we will be hated for His name’s sake (Luke 21:17). He’s talking about believers who from that faith seek to “*lead Godly lives here in time,*” for faith calls for a response.

Our modern critics are right when they call Christians hypocrites who act all pious on Sundays in church and throughout the week act just like the unwashed multitudes. And why would Christians do that? Is it because in our fleshly weakness, we want to avoid being recognized as Christians? We want to avoid the reviling, the evil things spoken about us; we want to avoid the persecution?

Why don’t we speak up against “*sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness*”? Why do we join in with the “*filthiness [and] foolish talk [and] crude joking*”? Don’t we “*become partners with [these sons of disobedience]*” by our silence or by our joining in with the filthiness? St. Paul says, don’t do it, “*for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them*” (Eph. 5:7-11)—even if that means a bit of persecution.

“*Blessed are the poor in spirit...*,” Jesus says. “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake ...*,” He says. Blessed are you, the penitent, the believer, the one who lives in Christ “*who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,*” “*for yours is the kingdom of heaven.*” And that’s the reality of your faith that Jesus talks about here in these Beatitudes, but there is more. There are promises here all wrapped up in those future tenses. Blessed are you in your mourning over sin, in your meekness before the Lord, in your hungering and thirsting after the righteousness found in Christ’s word and work—you shall be comforted; you shall inherit the earth; you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you as you live your Christian lives being merciful, doing

justice and loving kindness out of your pure heart, sharing the peace of God in Christ Jesus with others—you shall receive mercy; you shall see God; you shall be called sons of God.

Not that you will boast in any of this, for that would show you don't really get it, this blessedness. No, boast in the Lord, in Christ, in His cross for you, in this foolishness for you, in His weakness for you, in His poverty for you. "*For your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*" (2 Cor. 8:9). "*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*"

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.