

BLESSED ARE THE POOR

So today is Stewardship Sunday, or Covenant Sunday for us. Your pledge-cards, or your covenants, for next year are on the altar, or on their way. Now you look at the sermon title and say to yourself, “Ah, I get it ... this is to console me. ‘Blessed are the poor,’ which is now me, since I have just given so much money to the church.”

Well, you could do worse. The truth is, God is not stingy and he is not destitute. If we give gifts to God and they truly are meant for God, then God has ways of blessing us in return. The old saying is true: “You can never outgive God.” Strangely, from our perspective we can never tell what shape or form the blessings will take. Often they fill us where we had not even realized we were empty. For reasons not totally clear and that are often confusing, it seems that if we give gifts to God with any ulterior motives – that is, for any reasons other than gratitude to God – then the normal flow of joy and mounting blessings goes dormant. Not only do the saints teach us this, but most of us have learned and relearned it for ourselves many times. (Too many times.)

But what about this phrase, “blessed are the poor”? Do you really believe that? Most of the poor folk who come to this church looking for a handout do not seem to be enjoying life very much. Those of you struggling hard for a livelihood – sometimes struggling against fear, as well – do not seem to think that poverty would be a very blessed state, and you do everything you can to keep out of it.

The church in our time speaks a strange double standard on this matter of poverty and wealth. As a result, many Christians struggle with paradoxical attitudes about this subject. On the one hand they feel guilty about their prosperity, and on the other they feel guilty about not having achieved more. And wouldn’t most of us feel guilty if we failed to provide for our homes and families? What is this “blessed are the poor” business?

Far too many Christians – when they do bring gifts to God – are making a guilt-offering rather than a thanks-offering. Christ’s Kingdom cannot grow and flourish on guilt-offerings. Jesus came to free us from guilt. Grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love, among other things, are healers of guilt, so that we can go on to become what God created us to be. Jesus came to free us from guilt. Why are so many Christians still the most guilt-ridden citizens in our society?

Years ago, my brother-in-law used to say to me, “It is better to be rich and healthy than to be poor and sick.” When you get home, go to the nearest mirror and say that to yourself until you can say it without blinking or ducking. “It is better to be rich and healthy than to be poor and sick.” We cannot always choose our circumstances, but at least we can be clear about our preferences and about what we would like to head toward. I remember how much something inside me twisted and twitched when my brother-in-law first said that to me. It was not quite how I had been taught to think or what I had been led to expect by the church I grew up in.

Back in New England, Rabbi Sy Dresner and I started holding a conclave once each year for our high school youth groups – a three-day weekend where we and our youth groups would get together and challenge each other’s faith and commitment, with no holds barred. During that weekend, whoever was playing host would house the other group and plan experiences to immerse the visitors in our way of life and belief, and the visitors would challenge whatever did not seem authentic to them. The fun was enormous and sometimes the fur flew, and strangely it usually drew us close. After a few years, we added Larry McGinty and his Unitarian youth group. Finally, we added Walter Davis and his kids – a black congregation in Roxbury, which was known as one of the slums of Boston.

The Reverend Walter Davis had a dramatic effect on my understanding of ministry. He was the first pastor I had ever met who really understood how blessed it was to be poor. He wanted none of it for any member of his congregation, and he worked to pull his people out of poverty with passion and single-minded devotion. There is no time to tell most of it, but over the years he had developed a network for finding jobs. There was a standing offer to any member of his church that if they needed work, he would find a job for them. Only, it did not stop there. Anyone who was out of work and did *not* come to see him was out of the church. He was brutal: If you want to be on welfare – if you want to stop striving – go somewhere else. His large sanctuary was packed-out on the Sunday we were there. In the middle of the service, he called several teenagers up to the front and congratulated them before the entire congregation because they had each gotten an “A” on some exam in school. He also called forth several others and demanded they give an explanation before the entire congregation as to why they had received a “D” or an “F.” One girl had been cutting classes. He told her in front of everybody that if she had one more unexcused absence, she would

not be welcome there any longer – she could not be part of that church anymore. (You are not going to keep disgracing us.)

This pastor had a holy war against poverty. He fought it every way he knew, without compromise, and he broke every rule of pastoring that we had ever been taught. When we challenged him, it quickly became obvious that we had not thought about the issues very deeply, while he had been living with them for years. Behind the façade of the Roxbury slums, his people lived in clean, well-appointed, sometimes spacious apartments. They hosted us with grace and humor and wonderful food, and made us every bit as comfortable and welcome as we had made them the year before. Of course, from the people themselves, we learned the real stories behind Reverend Davis' gruff antics: how they had heard of the church and had come, pleading to be allowed to join; the promises they had had to make; how it had changed their lives and given their children a chance for a real future. Yes, sometimes people left, offended at Reverend Davis and his tactics. But those who stayed didn't care; they had real lives now, and the folk who left did not. *"Many are called, but few are chosen."*

If it is blessed to be poor, how come God is so rich? Well, Jesus was poor, wasn't He? We know He traveled light, and this bears thinking about. But that is not the same thing. Somebody who knows He can call twelve legions of angels, pay His taxes from the mouth of a fish, go "home" to position and wealth we cannot even begin to imagine – well, He maybe is not feeling very poor. Jesus certainly never spoke or acted like somebody poor. No, He looked at the world's wealth like a billionaire would look at an opportunity to earn three dollars an hour.

It has become traditional for the church to honor poverty and the poor, at least part of the time and out of one side of its mouth. I don't know if it is related, but more and more people in our society have become content to be poor and unproductive. In my view, it was not bad morals that broke Greece or Rome or any of the other great civilizations of history – like we were often taught when I was coming through school. Rather, it was a runaway welfare system that destroyed these civilizations: more people living off of the state than contributing to it. Of course, in a way that is a fundamentally moral issue, but fewer and fewer people think of it in those terms.

As always, you do not have to believe me. But I want to say that Christians are not supposed to be friendly with poverty. Christians are not supposed to be content to be poor themselves, and they are not

supposed to be content to have anybody else be poor either. You are supposed to know that God wants you whole, happy, healthy, and wealthy, and that it is the brokenness, rebelliousness, and alienation of this world which prevent that, not the will of God. You can honor St. Francis of Assisi if you want to, but I do not! I think he was a jerk – a rebellious teenager who never grew up. The Franciscan Order was sometimes incredible, but they quickly broke from what Francis taught, even before he died, or they would never have survived.

Some ministers and missionaries and monks are content to be poor – as long as the institutional church promises to take care of all their needs. But then, that is not really poor, is it? Yet I still hear many Christians talking as if they think they ought to be willing to be poor. On occasion, the nagging feeling keeps coming to most of us that we should be selling everything and giving it to the poor, so we can join the ranks of the truly faithful and dedicated. Who has done more good in our world, Bill Gates or Mother Teresa? We would not all give the same answer. Clearly, there has been room for both. But if you own Microsoft stock or use a computer, don't answer like a hypocrite.

Let's switch to imagination and assume that it is Stewardship Sunday in every church throughout the world. The church asks for financial support to carry on its life and work, and the people chant back: "Blessed are the poor. We finally believe it. We have not bothered to earn enough or save enough to have anything to give. We have finally become holy. Anything we had, we have already given away. Nobody can accuse us of being materialistic anymore. Blessed are the poor." And the following day, all the churches of the world would close their doors forever.

So far, on Stewardship Sunday the church is delighted that its people have not been stupid enough to listen to its preaching. Is it not a paradox if we preach "blessed are the poor" on fifty-one Sundays of the year and then suddenly, on Stewardship Sunday, we are delighted if our members are rich and generous?

Back to our imaginary scene. There are no gifts to give, no offerings to offer. For a time, the poor gather in fields or parks to chant "Blessed are the poor!" But soon the necessities of poverty call them to poverty's grim and powerless chores. And there is nothing left: no buildings, no Bibles, no programs, no art or music, no seminaries, not even the church's former efforts to help the poor. Poverty *means* no resources, no power or influence, no opportunity. It means that without outside

assistance, there is no hope. How can we even vaguely associate that with a goal or principle of the God we love and worship?

Well, enough of my opinions, you say. And quite rightly. We are people of the Bible. If the Bible honors poverty, then we will believe it, even if we do not obey it. It is because of biblical teachings, we must assume, that so many Christians through the ages have taken vows of poverty and believed that poverty is a virtue – that to be poor is to be closer to God. Who am I to question the stature of a man like St. Francis, or the many others who have sacrificed so much and inspired so many?

When I was a boy, many people still believed that medicine was good in direct proportion to how bad it tasted. A lot of Christian theology, I suspect, has been guided by this same principle. Where does the Bible honor poverty? Luke 12:33 says, “*Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail.*” It does not say “*Sell all your possessions.*” We dub that in. We assume it cannot be a reasonable statement. It cannot mean that we are looking for more resources by selling what is no longer necessary or what we are no longer using, and that we are always looking for more ways to support what we care about and believe in. No, we have to make it outlandish and ridiculous – perhaps as a way to escape what is really being asked of us? If we make it sound silly enough, then we don’t have to do any of it?

The rich young ruler (Luke 18:22) is told: “*One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.*” This is said to one individual with a special hang-up. If any of us have that same hang-up, we definitely need to follow that same instruction. The rich young ruler, by the way, did not follow the instruction. He is not a role model for the other disciples. Matthew (Levi) is rich. Galilean fishermen are not from the poverty class. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are wealthy. Some of the women disciples are identified as wealthy, with no disparagement – only gratitude for their support. None of the other followers, not even the inner twelve, are asked to give away possessions. They *are* asked to give time, life, and energy to the Kingdom movement – whatever that takes. Zacchaeus is enormously wealthy. He is not asked or commanded to give up anything. He himself, of his own free will, decides to give away *half* of his goods (Luke 19:8), and Jesus announces straight out that salvation has come to him (his house). For half, *not all* – and Zacchaeus can well afford it. With half, he is still enormously rich.

Why don't we stop trying to make it taste bad? Why don't we stop trying to make Jesus sound naive or stupid? Of course, Jesus wants a great deal from us. Would we really want a Lord and Savior who wanted nothing from us? Who was trying to accomplish nothing with us? What Jesus truly asks for, we really want to give – we want to be part of His purpose and His Kingdom. And yes, it is worth everything we have. No question about it. But if we are not good stewards, we will very quickly have nothing to give. Is that not the very point of today's Scripture reading?

The toughest passage I know on the subject is in Luke's sixth chapter: "*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.... But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.*" I suspect that Matthew's "*Blessed are the poor in spirit*" is more accurate to the true teaching, mostly because it matches the rest of Jesus' teachings and ministry much better. Humility is the first step of every authentic spiritual path. It may be that this is what Luke is also trying to say. At least it is clear that Jesus and His followers were adamant that the poor were invited into the Kingdom and into the church as much as anybody else. And isn't it strange that, however much the church talks about helping the poor, it never seems to get this real message clear enough?

Anyway, since Jesus' day, prejudice against the poor has turned to prejudice against the rich. I often hear from the church that rich people are mean, cruel, heartless, and probably got their wealth in some despicable way; that they should be brought down; that God hates them and will eventually punish them. I sometimes think that the rich are the most despised of all minorities. In many instances, they have even come to despise themselves. Am I talking about you? Everybody knows that God loves the poor. Do you know that God loves the rich? I mean, do you really *believe* it? Even if they stay rich? And I know there is a matching question: How many of the rich love God? But the first question has to come first or the second question has no meaning.

Today's Scripture passage, and many others, makes it clear that Jesus expects His followers to be productive, hard-working, and effective. They are also to be generous. The problem is not with wealth; wealth is only a resource. The problem is with *not caring* – having no love for others. Generosity, not poverty, is the virtue. And there can be no generosity unless we have something to give. "*By their fruits ye shall know them*" (Matthew 7:16, 20), not by their wants. By their love, not by their begging. By their generosity, not by their need. The will of God

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is for everybody to be rich, not for everybody to be poor. If you were God and had as much to accomplish as God does, would you want all your people to be poor?

An uneasy pall lies over parts of our country. I don't like some of what I keep hearing, and I wonder if you know how you sometimes sound. For instance, how many of you automatically assume that a person is more sincere, more dedicated, or more "Christian" if they work for nothing? As I read *The Book*, that may be poor stewardship. If your work has value and you also get paid for it, can you not double what you can accomplish for the Lord?

Maybe you rejoice about your house, your job, your car, your boat, your clothes, and your possessions elsewhere and look on them with gratitude and satisfaction. I hope so. Yet why is it that when we talk about them around the church, we get so many disclaimers? What makes you think that I or your other Christian friends care about how you were tragically forced against your will to buy a new car, how many miles were on the old one, or how you found it necessary to cheat some poor, unfortunate car dealer out of his rightful profits in order to acquire it?

In a former parish, I kept hearing about how therapeutic and beneficial to family solidarity swimming pools and dune buggies and ski lodges could be. Nobody loved the desert. Nobody liked to ski or swim. They hated their beach cottages and all the extra taxes and work they required. They really wanted to give more to the church, but 2.6-year-old Jimmy simply would not allow it. A 56-inch television screen was necessary for his well-being. I mean, it was heart-rending, the sacrifices those people had to buy. It brought tears to your eyes.

It took years before that church learned that it was fun to rejoice when a member had good fortune – that prosperity was not something to be ashamed of on Sunday morning. And of course, when that changed, people started giving more and more to the church.

So now when I mention tithing, I am starting to hear tear-jerking stories from some of you. I hate to cry in public. Couldn't we just rejoice instead? Am I being too subtle? "*Seek God's Kingdom first, and all these things will be yours as well.*" (Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:31)

God wants to bless people, not their poverty. Poverty is an enemy. It takes money to make money. The more resources you have, the more resources you can engender and the more good you can do with them,

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if that is your purpose. That is not secular wisdom! It comes straight out of today's Scripture reading.

Anyway, I wanted to remind you of what I know you know, somewhere deep inside. It is not how much we have that matters. It is who or what we are devoted to that matters. Generosity is not possible unless we have something to share. It is one of the church's purposes to destroy poverty, not to praise it. May you all become more and more prosperous. And may you all become tithers. And may we together become more and more faithful as our Lord's church.