

“I Am on Your Side”

10:00 AM, 01/29/17
Fr. Jim Plough

It's not often that all three Scripture readings for a given Sunday happen to have the same theme. Today is one such occasion. The prophet Zephaniah says: “I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly (Zephaniah 3: 32). St. Paul affirms: “God chose the lowly and despised of the world (I Cor. 1: 26-31).” Jesus proclaims: “Blessed are the poor in spirit (Matthew 5: 1-12).” All these texts speak of humility.

Here is a story about humility. A Jesuit, a Dominican, and a Franciscan all died and went to heaven. They were ushered into God's throne room, where God was seated on an immense, diamond-encrusted gold chair. God says to the Dominican: “Son of St. Dominic, what do you believe?” The Dominican answers, “I believe in God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth.” God asks the Franciscan: “Son of St. Francis, what do you believe?” The Franciscan says: “I believe in your Son, Jesus, who came to work with the poor.” Finally, God turns to the Jesuit and from his great throne asks: “Son of St. Ignatius, what do you believe?” The Jesuit says: “I believe you are in my seat!” It's hard to be humble when you are a Jesuit. I have friends who are Jesuits. This story comes from Father James Martin, S.J., Jesuit author of *THE JESUIT GUIDE TO (ALMOST) EVERYTHING.*

Come back to the gospel. Jesus is interacting with the crowds that pressed around him. The crowds are the key to breaking open what Jesus was teaching his disciples. Jesus is saying: look at those who surround us. They are not Pharisees from Jerusalem; they are not the wealthy and affluent. They are from all over, from all kinds of people: religious and non-religious, Jewish and non-Jewish, sinners and tax collectors, and prostitutes, and really, really religious people, and really, really Gentile people who aren't really considered religious by the really religious. There's this massive spectrum of humanity, and it's in this crowd that Jesus says: “Blessed are the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom.” The kingdom of God is theirs.

Poor in spirit designates those who are losers, those at the end of the rope, the bankrupt, the pathetic, the lame, the out of it – those without a trace of good – the morally empty, the pathetic. “Poor in spirit” is not a condition which we are to try to attain. There's nothing praiseworthy, noble, good, honorable, or positive about being poor in spirit.

Yet, Jesus says, “Blessed are you.” Another translation puts it: “Happy are you.” I have sometimes preferred to say “Congratulations!” All are expressions of praise for the destitute, the humble, the lowly. All amount to saying: “I am on your side.” Blessed are the losers, the pathetic, the deprived, the lame, the spiritual zeros because God is on your side.

Jesus is simply making an announcement. He's not giving an instruction –like the seven steps to get God's blessing. This is not a command – since he doesn't begin with here's what you need to do in order to be blessed. This is not advice – such as “Here's how I think you ought to approach the question. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with a simple announcement. He announces that God is on the side of everybody for whom there's no reason why God should be on their side.

No wonder that this passage is considered the jewel of the whole gospel of St. Matthew. This passage puts into perspective the whole ministry of Jesus: “I am on your side.” For Jesus to say I am on the side of those on the wrong side turns the whole notion of salvation upside down. We grew up believing that God's blessings are for particular people because of the particular works they have accomplished, or who they are, or what they've said. These are the people pleasing to God. Jesus, on the other hand, says “Blessed are the totally pathetic losers without a wisp of religion, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.”

This news can be difficult to swallow if you are not among the poor in spirit. Begrudging the poor in spirit for receiving the attention you should be receiving is like the Jesuit who said I believe you are in my seat. Do we really get it when Jesus says I have not come to minister to those who are healthy, but for those who are ill? When he says I have come as food for the hungry, not for those who are satisfied? When we say “Lord, Lord,” to get his attention, and he does not answer? When we work hard, earn our living, get our hands blistered, are morally upright, and wonder why we do not feel good? Why aren't we rewarded? When we say, “It's not fair that I go on praying, over and over, every day, and God remains silent?”

Our world is topsy-turvy, everything upside down. So is the world of the spirit. That is the irony of religion. Those who are really religious are perceived as not religious at all. Jesus is on their side! When there's no reason in the world why you should be considered blessed, you are blessed nonetheless. That's the message Jesus announced in the beginning as the summation of his ministry.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Jesus is on your side! Maybe we should reconsider where we stand. It may not be so bad after all.

[I am indebted to Rob Bell for presenting the poor in spirit as those for whom Jesus is on their side.]