

I will be happy when...

(Text: Matthew 5:1-11)

See if you can finish this sentence: "I will be happy when...."

-- I will be happy when I grow up and move away from home.

-- I will be happy when I fall in love and get married.

-- I will be happy when I can buy a new car.

-- I will be happy when I get promoted.

-- I will be happy when I retire.

-- I will be happy when I have fewer worries

-- I will be happy when my children listen better.

-- I will be happy when I am financially more secure

-- I will be happy -- when they lay me to rest.

Jesus has some wisdom on the subject of happiness. His wisdom might not make much sense to you. What he has to say seems exactly backwards -- upside down. When you hear what he has to say, you are likely to write off his wisdom as religious gobbledygook -- something so highflying that the rubber never hits the road. But don't dismiss Jesus too quickly. Many people have tested Jesus' wisdom and found it true. It just takes some getting used to.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..."

The first thing Jesus does is to change the vocabulary. He doesn't talk about happiness, although some versions of the Bible use the word "happy" instead of the word "blessed." "Blessed" is a better word, because of the ways that we use the word "happy." Happiness is taking the summer off -- or getting promoted -- or getting a new car -- or watching the Flames win four in a row.

Jesus has something different in mind -- something that goes deeper -- something that seems strange when we first hear it. He says:

-- "Blessed are the poor in spirit...."

-- "Blessed are those who mourn...."

-- "Blessed are the meek...."

-- "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...."

Now you see what I mean by upside down. Those are not the rules as we know them.

The rules as we know them are:

-- Blessed are the rich, because they can buy what they want.

-- Blessed are the strong, because they can take what they want.

-- Blessed are winners, because it is no fun to be a loser.

But Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...."

He goes even further, giving us a total of nine beatitudes. I cannot do justice to all nine in the time that I have, so I will treat only the first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...."

What does it mean to be poor in Spirit? First it means that we admit our dependence upon God. Secondly it effects our values in the present. Thirdly it effects the way we prepare for the life to come as we age.

1) To be poor in Spirit means that we admit our dependence upon God:

The Greek word that is translated "poor" is ptochos (p-to-chos). It means abject poverty. True poverty is a cruel thing. It breaks people. They suffer. Confronted daily with their own helplessness, they know the difference that

even a small act of mercy can make. They watch eagerly for a gesture or a glance that might promise help. They long for a bit of kindness. They crave a bit of dignity.

Standing before God, the poor in spirit are like that. They bring nothing in their hands that God needs -- and nothing in their hearts that compels God to accept them.

-- They come in their poverty hoping for sustenance.

-- They come in their brokenness hoping to be mended.

-- They come in their sin hoping to be forgiven.

-- They come in their grief hoping to be comforted.

-- They come in their illness, hoping to be healed.

-- They do not come bargaining with God, because they have nothing to offer.

-- It is precisely their humility -- their openness -- that makes them fertile soil to receive God's blessings. And so Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...." Blessed are those who come to God on their knees.

But this isn't our preferred mode of travel -- on our knees. We prefer to be in control. We prefer to pay for what we get. We prefer not to be in anyone's debt. We prefer to walk up and lay cash on the barrel-head. And yet when we can allow our soul to embrace this teaching we will begin to discover that as we are able to more fully acknowledge our dependence upon God that:

2) To be poor in Spirit effects how we live in the present:

Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest and author, met Mother Teresa in Rome. He said that the first thing he noticed about her was her constant focus on Jesus. People were asking questions, and she was answering in a way that reflected her total focus on Jesus. Her answers sounded, at first blush, simplistic and naïve. But Nouwen sensed, not only her own personal strength, but also the

subtle power of her answers.

When Nouwen finally had the opportunity to speak with Mother Teresa, he told her of his problems. He spoke of his struggles. He asked her advice. She answered simply, "If you spend one hour a day in contemplative prayer and never do anything which you know is wrong, you will be all right."

Listen to that one more time. It sounds simplistic, but is really profound. "If you spend one hour a day in contemplative prayer and never do anything which you know is wrong, you will be all right."

Nouwen says, "With these words she answered none -- as well as all -- of my problems at the same time. It was now up to me to be willing to move to the place where that answer could be heard."

To be poor in Spirit means that in the present we will live in such a way that as we contemplate on Jesus, choosing never to do anything that we know to be wrong it will influence the way we live. We will concur with the words of Billy Graham asking God the Holy Spirit to change our hearts so that our priorities are in tune with Jesus' priorities.

We are rich in the things that perish, but poor in the things of the Spirit.
We are rich in gadgets, but poor in faith,
We are rich in goods, but poor in grace.
We are rich in know-how, but poor in character.
We are rich in words but poor in deeds.

3. Thirdly to be poor in Spirit will effect that way we prepare for the life to come as we age.

The story is told of one of the early presidents of the United States, John Quincy Adams. When he was very old, he endured a particularly bad winter. He was in bed for months. When spring came he was determined to go for a walk and, with the aid of his cane, he made his way slowly down the street. A friend passing by said to him, "Well, tell me, how is John Adams today" The old gentleman replied, "If you're asking about this old house in which John Adams lives, I can tell you it is in pretty bad shape -- the windows are broken

out, the roof is caving in, I can't remember anything any more. The foundations are weak and tottery. Why most any wind that comes along makes this old house shake and tremble. I dare say that this house is in such ill condition that no doubt its tenant will soon be moving out. But, if you're asking about John Adams himself, then I can tell you he's all right and will be a thousand years from now."

Aging can be for some people very hard indeed. And yet it can be a place where we recognize with Mr. Adams that while we are poor in Spirit, because of the promise of heaven we can face the decaying of our bodies and minds in a way that with John Donne we affirm:

1 Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
2 Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
3 For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,
4 Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
5 From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
6 Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
7 And soonest our best men with thee do go,
8 Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
9 Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
10 And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
11 And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
12 And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
13 One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
14 And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

This is All Saints Day. For two thousand years the church has taught that true Saints are those who answer the question "I will be happy when" we can acknowledge dependence upon God. so that our present values and priorities are preparing us for the life to come.