

Session 1

Text: Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (NIV)

***Summary:** Blessed are the poor in spirit ... By definition, poverty has to do with scarcity. We usually think of poverty in terms of money or possessions, but poverty can also be social, economic, political, and spiritual. Without resources or support to change their situation, people living in poverty are often helpless to find a way out. Jesus begins the beatitudes by highlighting poverty, turning expectations upside down like he does throughout his entire earthly ministry: the kingdom of heaven will be given to the poor, those whose neediness moves them to humbly receive.*

Personal Quiet Time

Read Matthew 5:3, and with those words in mind reflect on the following story:

Very early in the morning, a group of friends and I piled into a car and drove to Vellore, a city in southern India. We began our journey before dawn since Bangalore, the city we were staying in, is a metropolis of 12.5 million people and we wanted to beat the rush of traffic. Even this early the roads were thick with vehicles, and I watched out the window as the large city woke up. It was mesmerizing to drive through the city and into the countryside, taking in the landscape and the people as they zoomed past. Looking at the people both on the road and beside it, I found myself wondering, "what is your story? What makes you sad or happy, fulfilled or desperate?"

After a few hours of driving, we arrived at Shanti Grammam, a community for people living with leprosy. While the disease itself has ravaged each of their bodies in one way or another, the most horrible reality of leprosy is the social stigma surrounding the afflicted person: he or she becomes completely unwelcome in the community and family where belonging was once felt. As we approached the commune, I struggled to wonder about how bitter I might be if I were in their situation at this moment -- shunned by my own family, cast away to live in a tiny hut amongst others who were also losing their vision, their teeth, and their body parts to leprosy, and then visited by a group of white people who swoop in and out, taking photos and leaving wide-eyed.

We timidly exited our vehicles, fully feeling the uncertainty of the pending encounter. A handful of men and women were milling around a common outdoor area. A few others were on the periphery, tending to gardens or goats. The air felt thick, not just because of the heat and humidity, but because my anxiety was climbing from my stomach into my throat. And then, the men and women of Shanti Grammam welcomed us with wordless hospitality that superseded the language barrier, with hospitality that characterizes the Body of Christ.

We moved together into a community building that resembled a sturdily structured gazebo. Sitting in a circle, we sprinkled ourselves in among the community while my friend James began to help the men and women share their stories with us.

The words they spoke were heartbreaking. The realities of what they had lost, what they had suffered, and what they had experienced are unlike anything I could relate to. They were helpless to change their situation, and none of their family or friends could help without risk that they, too would be cast out of society and left utterly alone. Their faces reflected this pain, this loneliness ... until they started talking about Jesus. Unable to understand their language, we could tell when they started talking about Jesus before James even caught up in translation, for the joy of the Lord radiated from the faces of those who testified not only about how much they love Jesus but how much Jesus loves them.

In this community where people's existences are so different than what one hopes for or imagines as part of a life story, Jesus is alive and active, bringing tangible restoration to men and women whose bodies and earthly families have fallen apart. These men and women who have lost everything hugged their audio Bibles to their hearts and kissed them repeatedly as they told us how they have found Jesus, how they love Jesus, how knowing Jesus changes everything. They still have pain, and they still have sadness, but in their deep need they have encountered the deep love of Jesus, and the kingdom of heaven is theirs even now.

We left the gazebo and walked around the community. I helped a woman chase away the monkeys who were a danger to her baby goats. And I wondered at the way I could learn so much about who Jesus is in a place

so different from home, from a people who seemed like they had nothing to offer, and whose language I couldn't understand even a little.

For this retreat, you have left home. You are in a different place. You might be apart from friends and family, you will feel uncomfortable and anxious, and you will spend a lot of time with people you might not have been hanging out with otherwise. And Jesus will meet you here, in unexpected ways, with unexpected lessons. How can this retreat put you in a place or mindset of being able to humbly receive the good news of the love of Jesus? What feels like it has fallen apart in your life, and what do you need Jesus to put back together? When was the last time you held your Bible like a treasure, or knew with a deep assurance that Jesus changes everything? How does stepping away this weekend move you to be poor in spirit, and how will you look for and receive the kingdom of heaven?

Reread Matthew 5:3, and spend time reflecting on these questions:

- What does this verse reveal about who God is?
- What are you hearing about who you are?
- How does this impact the way you live into God's story today?

Prayer:

Disturb us, O Lord, when we are too well-pleased with ourselves when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, O Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the water of life when, having fallen in love with time, we have ceased to dream of eternity and in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of Heaven to grow dim.

Stir us, O Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas where storms show Thy mastery, where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. In the name of Him who pushed back the horizons of our hopes and invited the brave to follow.

Amen

-Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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