

Sermon for 6 Epiphany C  
St John's, Gloucester  
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What's good about poverty? Jesus said, "Blessed (or happy) are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." So is he saying poverty is good?

How many of you think poverty is good? (Raise your hands.) How many of you think poverty is bad? How many aren't sure? How many of you have lived in poverty at some point in your life—being unemployed or unable to work, needing food stamps or MassHealth, and so on?

Let's start here: What's BAD about poverty? (can't care for self or children, don't have access to good jobs or education, can lead to bad health, depression, violence, don't feel good about self, can't contribute in way you want). A Dutch historian named Rutger Bregman gave a TED Talk. He wanted to find out why poor people make such poor decisions. He found that just by being poor, your life and brain are so overwhelmed and overloaded that you can't function well. You can't look beyond the present and you make poor choices—around health habits, relationships, jobs, and so on. His talk is named, "Poverty isn't a lack of character; it's a lack of cash." (And his solution is guaranteed basic income--making sure each man, woman, and child has enough cash to pay for housing, food, education, and health care. The cost? The best estimates come up with \$175 billion dollars per year in America. Instead of what we currently spend on childhood poverty alone in terms of health care, dropouts, and crime-- around \$500 billion a year. Hmm, eradicating poverty at less than half of what we spend now on poverty.)

I think most people would agree that poverty is bad. So why don't we solve it? But I digress. Is there anything GOOD about poverty? Sure there is. You don't have to worry about what the stock market is doing or where to invest your money. You don't have to plan out your vacation in Cancun or maybe anywhere. If you're poor enough, you don't have to worry about paying for healthcare, if you're on MassHealth. What else is good about poverty? Some members of previous congregation that I served mentioned growing up poor. They said that they lived surrounded by families, neighbors and friends who looked out for each other. One recalled living in a largely black neighborhood and made deep friends across racial lines. Being poor can push you to rely on others, develop non-traditional relationships, be able to live without much, even be grateful for the smallest things. It's no secret that the most generous people are those who have the least.

Poverty can be soul-crushing and is bad for health. It is not a good thing. And yet, there are some things that poverty can teach us or push us into that are good. Maybe that's why Jesus starts his "sermon on the plain" with "Blessed are you who are poor." The setting is this: Jesus goes up on a mountain and prays all night, then he comes down and chooses his 12 disciples. After that, he is met with a crush of people--disciples, crowds of Jews from surrounding towns and as far away as Jerusalem in the south, and also non-Jews who were from as far away as Tyre and Sidon in the far north. They have come to be healed by Jesus, and so he spends time healing them and casting out evil spirits. **And then** he turns to his disciples and gives this teaching:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man . . . for surely your reward is great in heaven.”

Jesus is telling the disciples that they are blessed or happy if they are poor, hungry, weeping, reviled. Again, it's not that these things are great, in and of themselves. They can easily lead to desperation, despair, addiction, suicide. But for people who believe in God, who are trying to follow Jesus, they can lead to a deeper knowledge of God and reliance of God's power. I think that is the crux of the “Sermon on the Plain.”

About thirteen years ago, I was married with children at home, working at two jobs I loved; I owned house and a car, had friends and enough income. Within two years I was divorced, with kids in college, unemployed, living off of savings and food stamps. I had applied to be rector at 40 churches, interviewed at a bunch and was rejected by all of them. The Episcopal Church does not value older women priests. Since then, I have been partly employed, self-employed, partly and self-employed, unemployed. I served a parish that which was a train-wreck, which I got blamed for, so I left ministry. I have railed at God, I have walked away from God. Poverty is not fun. I finally realized—like anyone in a 12-step program—that I had no power over my situation and had no idea what to do or where to do it. And I turned to God, finally ready to access God's power.

This major turning point came in April of 2017. After leaving ministry, I went to Colorado to help take care of my dad. We thought he was dying, but no one apparently told him. He kept on living, so I took a job. I was working at an underpaid job in a toxic non-profit and was let go—that is, fired, I still don't know why—in October 2016. After looking for work and interviewing and being turned down multiple times for 5 months, I hit the wall. I realized that what I was doing wasn't working, but that I didn't know what to do. I turned completely to God. I said, “God, I give up. I have been trying and trying and nothing is working. I give it all to you. You have to show me what to do and where to go. I can't do it. I need you to do it.” I turned to the One who has the power and the will to direct my life and fill it with good.

Within 2 weeks, my dad died. And I figured I needed help to find out what to do, so I called together a discernment committee to help me do it. When we finished up our first session, where they affirmed that I still had a call to the priesthood, I saw a text from my landlord, asking to meet with me that night. He gave me 30 days to find a new place, so they could turn the apartment into an AirBnB. Great. Unemployed AND homeless. Through this long walk with adversity, my heart and my mind were cracked open. I have experienced life on the edges, where so many people live. I learned to ask for help and not be ashamed. I started having a lot more compassion and less judgment on others and on myself. I stopped taking stuff for granted, and learned to be more grateful. Now I really gave it all to God. I started trusting in God to provide. To provide housing. To provide the people I needed. To provide the next step. To provide income. I got people and answers and housing, but usually only a month at a time. All I needed was to take the next step. And trust. Knowing my poverty, my need, my hunger.

Blessed are you who are poor—because all the riches of God are available to you. Blessed are you hungry, because the God of power will fill you. Blessed are you who mourn, because God will bring you to laughter. Blessed are you when others reject you, revile you, hate you on my account—you will have a great reward.

When we realize where true power lies, when we reach out in prayer and faith and call on that power, then our lives are indeed rich and filled and happy. Not without struggle or pain. But like the people wanting healing from Jesus, reaching out towards him, because we KNOW who can change and heal our lives.

And the woes? That's for people who know of God but choose riches and comfort and ease over their life with God. That's so easy. That's where most of our churches have been for decades—filled with people who have life easy and really don't need a deep relationship to God.

Episcopal churches have for so long been the well-off, entitled places, filled with well-off, entitled people. Now more and more churches are struggling, losing people, dying. I think we're becoming the poor places. And that is good news. Suddenly, it's not good enough to be a country club or a social place. We actually need God. We pretty much don't have a clue about what to do or how to turn this around. But what is the purpose of Church? To support and nurture our relationship with God and our ability to bring good news to the poor.

Rejoice! God is very near to us! Jesus wants us to follow him, trusting not in our own abilities or wealth, but in his power to nurture, heal, transform—even our whole society. We can be like the trees alongside the river, who is Jesus, planted firmly and thriving, able to withstand adversity. Because we don't trust in ourselves or in wealth or in even government, but the One with the real power.

Blessed are we! Rejoice and be glad, for our reward is great now. I am heartened that a few of us are gathering to pray. I am heartened that people came up for healing prayers last week. I am heartened that there is love and openness and hope in this place. Let us pray! AMEN.