

It's "U R," Not "A"

Sermon, January 29, 2023

Text: Matthew 5:1-4

As introduced last week, the background for the Sermon on the Mount which begins in Chapter 5 is that Jesus was being followed by huge crowds who, according to Matthew 4:23, brought *"every disease and every sickness among the people."* These were crowds of people who didn't have it all together, crowds of people who were seeking direction, crowds of people who were seeking blessing, crowds of people who were seeking healing. In Matthew's gospel thus far Jesus has been born (*chapter 1*), He has been visited by Magi, escaped to Egypt to avoid being massacred by Herod, then came to Galilee to be reared to adulthood (*chapter 2*), He is baptized by John and then went off into the wilderness forty days to face temptation (*Chapter 3*), and then in chapter 4, He launched His public ministry, called His first disciples and large crowds came out to see Him from all over the region. And as we just read from chapter 5, *"Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them, saying ..."* The following three chapters contain this "Sermon on the Mount" which begins with what has been called the Beatitudes, which comes from the Latin *beatus*, "blessed." Or, as one preacher put it, these are the "Be" Attitudes, as in, *"If you want to be blessed, this is the way you ought to Be! These are the attitudes you ought to have!"*

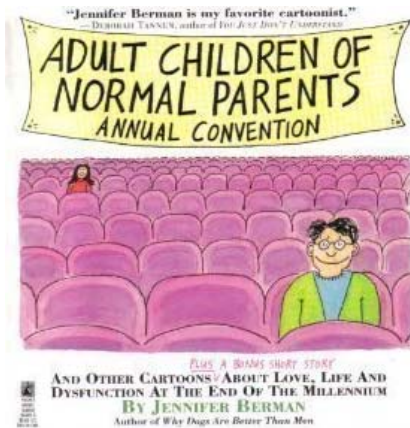
This morning we will look at the first two: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."* Or, as paraphrased in the first two stanzas of our previous hymn: *"Blessed are the humble souls that see their emptiness and poverty; treasures of grace to them are given and crowns of joy laid up in heaven." "Blessed are the men of broken heart who mourn for sin with inward smart, the blood of Christ divinely flows healing balm for all their woes."* There is a progression in the order of how the beatitudes are listed, which I won't go into detail about other than to note that each beatitude seems to build on the other in a progressive way. If we would be blessed, we need to take the necessary progressive steps. The very first step on the path to blessedness is to recognize our spiritual poverty, that we are poor in spirit. We do that when we honestly admit our spiritual need, when we acknowledge our sinfulness, when we own up to our weakness, when we face up to our selfishness, our envy, our hubris, when we are honest about the fears and struggles and doubts that dog our path. When we admit our poverty of spirit, then and only then the door of grace and blessing, the door to the Kingdom of Heaven, begins to open to us.

Spirituality, by the way, is not something we ever get "good" at. It is, paradoxically, something that we receive only by confessing how "poor" we are at it. I've mentioned this before, but it's one of the humbling paradoxes of the spiritual life that even the greatest saints realize just how profoundly unspiritual they really are; the apostle Paul really meant it when he called himself the chief of sinners. I've mentioned this before as well, but it is almost like cleaning a house! One Monday years ago I decided to spend the day cleaning my entire house while the kids were at school, and I started in the kitchen ... nearly five hours later, I was still in the kitchen! The more I cleaned and scrubbed, the more I found just how cruddy things had become! Well, the closer one draws to God, with all His perfection and holiness, the harsher the Light seems to shine on the extent of our dark failures and shortcomings and the more we realize how we don't measure up even to our own standards, let alone His. As we grow in faith, we see more and more just how much work there is to do! We see our spiritual poverty. It can be humbling to draw too close to God; in fact, for this reason the temptation is great to shy away from Him. But it is the only path to blessing. Those who are poor in spirit recognize they can't "do" this on their own. *"I am spiritually impoverished. Help!"*

The next step on the path to blessing is the step of mourning, as our preceding hymn paraphrases: *"Blessed are the men of broken heart who mourn for sin with inward smart, the blood of Christ divinely flows healing balm for all their woes."* We understand what it means to mourn our losses ... our loss of loved ones, our loss of health, our loss of family stability, our loss of innocence, our loss of hopes and dreams and ideals. Such loss has made you poorer; it has impoverished you, it has taken something from you. Many of you can testify, as I can, to the comforting strength and utter reality of God's presence meeting you profoundly in your loss; in a way, your loss has paradoxically made you richer. But what does it mean, as the hymn intimates, to mourn our "sin with inward smart," to mourn our poverty of spirit? Do we really mourn that we are made spiritually impoverished by our sin?

One of the reasons it's hard for us to mourn our sinful condition is that our society is determined to try to get us off the hook for our sin. It keeps giving us more and more excuses for why we do the bad things we do. We are victims of our dysfunctional families, we are victims of bad DNA, we are victims of bad schools and dysfunctional government and peer pressure. That was the main premise of a controversial book published in the nineties, *"A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character"*, by Charles Sykes. As a book review summarized: *"The plaint of the victim — 'It's not my fault' --- has become the loudest and most influential voice in America, an instrument of personal and lasting political change. In 1960, fewer than 100,000 lawsuits were filed in federal courts; in 1990, more than 250,000 were filed. Charles Sykes is calling upon Americans to dismantle the culture of victimization by recognizing personal responsibility and refusing to reflexively blame others."*

A story is cited about a man suing a cable TV company in Wisconsin (*I used this story once in a sermon eighteen years ago, but the repetition won't hurt!*). He tried to cancel cable TV in his home four years earlier, but the company kept sending the signal ... for free! He wasn't billed! Four years he received cable television in his home for free, and he filed a lawsuit ... claiming his wife gained fifty pounds, his kids got failing grades in school, and he himself wasted too many waking hours watching this nefarious cable programming of the TV company mercilessly and cruelly forced into his home (*I added the "mercilessly and cruelly forced" part*). It was all the cable company's fault! We're victims of television, we're victims of advertising, and of course we're victims of bad parenting ... I also told you in



that sermon eighteen years ago about a cartoon that appeared in the **New Yorker** magazine, a drawing of a Madison Square Garden-sized amphitheater with a great banner above the giant platform that read, "ANNUAL CONVENTION OF ADULT CHILDREN OF NORMAL PARENTS". There were two people sitting in the seats (*I recently found this again on a Google search that took me to Amazon; it was the cover of a book of similar cartoons by a Jennifer Berman; she also compiled another book of her satirical cartoons entitled "Why Dogs Are Better than Men"*) This victimization mindset means we are increasingly accounting for our problems and our conditions and our shortcomings in life not by mourning our sins, but by finding somebody else to blame ...and it seems there's always someone to blame for our life not turning out the way we wanted; we are never completely responsible. This contributes to another social condition of the day, which is a massive spirit of complaint. We foster and encourage complaint because somebody is not doing you right, and, by golly, you got a right to complain about that!

Which brings me to the sermon title, "It's 'U R' Not A." (*You may have thought, "You are not a what?"*) The word in the Beatitude is spelled "M O U R N," not M O A N. "U R," not "A." It is "mourn," not "moan." The beatitude doesn't say, "*Blessed are those who moan, for they shall feel better.*" It doesn't say that! That's **not** the next step to spiritual blessing. It says blessed are those who mourn. Those who mourn their spiritual condition, not the spiritual condition of some sinner out there who "*did me wrong and messed me up.*" We got so much moaning going on because somebody, somewhere, somehow must have done us wrong! Now, I know we do have people who really are victims. There are people who may be among us this morning who have real hardships that are not their fault, people who have been truly victimized by illness, or terrorized by criminals, or who've been emotionally or physically abused by people they perhaps loved and trusted. Let's not trivialize their true victimization by this universalizing of victimhood, assuming that all of us are abused every day all the time.

Another difficulty is that when we view all of our problems in life as the result of our victimization, well, that means somebody else is responsible for our life now. When we are in the habit of blaming others for our unhappiness, we are admitting impotence ... we are asserting our happiness is wholly contingent upon the actions and behavior of others, which we can't control. And so every time we take on the role of victim we relinquish control of our life (*or some area of our life*) to someone else. We're giving up our responsibility, our right to make choices. The best way to hang on to your freedom and your responsibility for your own life is to not take yourself off the hook for your own condition and hang the blame on someone else. Rather, let us confess our sin, acknowledge and mourn our spiritual need, that we might be restored to the path of freedom and blessedness.

It was Martin Luther who said that every one of us carry around in our pockets the nails of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He was wounded for whose transgressions? **Our** transgressions. Sometimes we need to be reminded of the rather obvious fact that we are not the crucified; rather, we are the crucifier. And to confess, acknowledge, own up to, our sin. The blessing and beatitude and the divine promise is that when we do that, we shall be comforted. Jesus uses the same word here that He uses to describe the Holy Spirit later on; the Holy Spirit is the Comforter Who comes to those who confess their spiritual need. Comfort, as you may remember, comes from two Latin words: *cum* and *forte* -- "with strength." The Holy Spirit comes with strength and blessing to those who acknowledge and mourn their poverty in spirit.

I invite you to once again turn to the Affirmation of Faith in our bulletins (*Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1*)

What is our only comfort in life and death?

THAT I BELONG -- BODY AND SOUL, IN LIFE AND IN DEATH -- NOT TO MYSELF,
BUT TO MY FAITHFUL SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST.

How many things must I know that I may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?

THREE. FIRST, THE GREATNESS OF MY SIN AND WRETCHEDNESS.
SECOND, HOW I AM FREED FROM ALL MY SINS AND THEIR WRETCHED CONSEQUENCES IN JESUS CHRIST.
THIRD, WHAT GRATITUDE I OWE TO GOD FOR SUCH REDEMPTION. AMEN