

'Blessed are the poor?' That can't be right



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Patty had Down syndrome and she was often in the “community living skills” class I taught at a residential school for people with mental and physical disabilities. She liked to giggle and tease. She also had a temper and could stomp her feet and yell. Even though we couldn’t always understand what she was saying, her feelings were loud and clear.

Patty liked to wear lots of costume jewelry and she always carried a small purse with just about everything she valued tucked inside. No one, including the teacher, was ever allowed to touch that bright-colored purse. Patty, like most of the rest of my students, had very little to call her own. But she was content with what she had, even if she loved to shop and find other small things to stuff in her bag.

“Blessed are the poor.”

John dropped his heavy rucksack on the floor and sat down with a heavy sigh. His camp was washed out again and everything he valued was stuffed into that small pack. I poured him a hot cup of coffee and gave him a fresh blanket and a new sleeping bag just donated by the synagogue. John’s gratefulness needed no words, but he thanked me anyway. He smiled when I brushed it off. “I’m only giving what has been given to give,” I said, or something like that.

A few months later, after John was found dead in a bathroom at the mall, our chaplaincy team drew together a small circle in the park to remember

him. Knowing that John was Scottish, we read from the poet Robert Burns and a passage from John’s Bible I retrieved from the shambles of his tent on the hillside.

The Scots poet wrote:

“So in lone Poverty’s dominion drear,
sits meek Content with light, unanxious heart;

Welcomes the rapid moments, bids them part;
Nor asks if they bring [anything] to hope or fear.”

John was very anxious sometimes. Where would he safely sleep tonight? Where could he hide today from the fearful, judging eyes and the prowling police? Yet, there was a certain content in his eyes, a sparkle of hope, and he impressed us with his gentleness.

“Blessed are the poor.”

Some tell us “blessed” means being happy, as if people who have little should be happy with what they have, not ask us for handouts and stay in their place — even if that’s hell. Others tell us Luke had it wrong (6:20) and Matthew got it right (5:3): “Blessed are the poor In Spirit.” You see, it has to mean this is a spiritual thing, right?

We hear more and more about the “prosperity gospel” and those “blessed” by God with success. They fervently pray to have a large home full of “God’s abundance.” For some, that proves the Lord is watching over them, pleased to surround them with “divine gifts.” That makes them happy and makes God happy, too. But, are we ever satisfied? Do we ever have “enough”?

We’ve turned it around and upside down. The new “improved” gospel proclaims: “Blessed are those with much, for God has blessed them.”

I sometimes think back to those long ago days when our circle of youthful believers yearned for the end, the Sec-

ond Coming, the “rapture” up into heaven. We were only young people with the promise of life ahead of us, but we watched the skies for any sign of “His return.” We were His children and He was coming back for us — to take us Home to be with Him forever. We knew without a doubt, it would all happen very soon.

Well, it didn’t. We didn’t have time to be disappointed because, it might be today!

“Blessed are the poor ... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

It never occurred to our youthful minds and none of our revered Bible teachers ever suggested that this verse might be about someone else. As I like to say, what if people really took the “Word at its word” and believed it? What if Jesus was literally saying the kingdom belongs to poor folks — poverty is the key to open heaven’s door?

Voices rise in protest: “Heavens! He surely didn’t mean to say poor people would be taken to heaven first — before any of the “true believers”! What good is faith, if we aren’t the first to enter the heavenly gates! Obviously He means to bless poor ‘Christians.’ Besides, people are poor for many reasons (usually their fault) and they may not even believe in God. How can we make sense of this”?

Patty, John and countless others are ready to teach — maybe “bless” us — if we have the ears to hear and eyes to see.

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