

## KENOSIS

### Philippians 2:5-11

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

### Matthew 5:1-12 (the Beatitudes)

<sup>5</sup> Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them.

He said:

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

<sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### MESSAGE:

The title of today’s message is a word which you probably never have heard before: kenosis. Kenosis is a form of a Greek verb which means “to empty something out.” When Paul was urging the members of the church at Philippi to model their lives after Christ, he used the word “kenosis” to describe how Jesus had “emptied himself out” of his divine privileges for our sake. He wrote, “...*although Jesus was by nature God, he did not consider being equal with God something to cling to, but emptied himself out, taking the*

*form of a servant and becoming like men.*” In the same way, Paul says, Christians should strive to empty themselves of their longing for things of this world so that they may be filled with the Holy Spirit of God who will fill them with treasures that can be found only in the Kingdom of God.

It is this idea of kenosis or emptying-out that lies behind the opening twelve verses of the *Sermon on the Mount*—the so-called beatitudes or blessings which comprise our Gospel lesson for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent. These are among the most quoted—and in some ways enigmatic—verses in all of Scripture. More than one honest soul has asked, *“Pray tell, what is so blessed about being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry, thirsty and persecuted?”* A good question. And as long as we look at these verses through worldly eyes, they DO seem puzzling. Taken at face value, there’s nothing attractive about ending up at the bottom of the human pile. It’s only when we begin to understand that Jesus is describing a process of spiritual awakening and growth in these verses—a process of emptying ourselves of bad things so that we can be filled with good things—that they begin to make sense. So from that perspective, let’s consider what the beatitudes have to tell us about getting rid of the bad so that we can be filled with the good. This will be an expository sermon and you’re welcome to follow along in your bulletins or Bibles. They are found in *Matthew 5:1-12*

First, Jesus says, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* What does this mean? Well, it means that as Paul Says elsewhere we are born dead in our sins. We have physical life but we have no spiritual life in us: we are, you might say, half dead. When we come to know this, we are blessed because then we realize that only God can give us spiritual life. Our problem is that as long as we stay focused on what the world has to offer, we won’t long for the spiritual life that God can give us. But if we empty ourselves out of the desires the world spawns in us—ambition, competitiveness, vanity, pride in our possessions and so forth, we can be filled with the fruits of God’s Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness gentleness and self-control. Isaiah wrote: *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! ...Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.”* (*Isaiah 55:1-2*) It all starts with kenosis. Emptying.

Next Jesus says, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”* Our first reaction to the newfound knowledge that we are spiritually dead is to grieve over our condition. We thought that we were well-fed and alive—and maybe we were, materially speaking—but now we have to face the fact that we are really half dead. This does not seem the least bit like good news, but it actually is. We’ve left the world of illusions and entered the world of spiritual reality. We may initially mourn the loss of the comforting myths that kept us happy, but now we have provided a place in ourselves for God the Holy Spirit to enter, and He will comfort us.

Then Jesus says, *“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”* The knowledge of our spiritual emptiness humbles us and makes us meek. This is perhaps the most critical step in setting out on our faith journey. Believing in our hearts that down deep we are empty and dead. Feeling the weight of shame where there used to be soaring pride. The world, our own flesh and the devil conspire furiously to persuade us not to take this “leap of faith.” We cling desperately to our pride because pride is the quintessence of sin—original sin. Meekness comes only when we accept in our hearts what we already know in our minds: that apart from God we are nothing! We are chaff that the wind blows

about in every direction. When we finally accept this we have become meek and are ready to inherit the treasures which God yearns to give us. Emptied of our pride, we are ready to receive true spiritual riches.

Next: *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”* Having been emptied of our pride and beginning to see ourselves as we really are, we realize that we have no righteousness of our own. So just as we began to hunger for God’s Spirit once we realized that we were empty, we now begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness that comes from the same place. And God wastes no time in responding. Paul writes: *“But now a righteousness from God...has been made known....This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”* (Romans 3:21) Now we are ready to learn what it means to have the Holy Spirit living in us—that when we have finally emptied ourselves of our pride, when we have repented and know our need and know that we cannot supply our need, we are ready to receive the righteousness which God freely gives us through faith in His Son. We can begin to comprehend what it means to say that Jesus emptied himself of His righteousness and filled Himself up with our sins so that we might be emptied of our sins and filled with His righteousness. That He became empty so that we might become full. Kenosis.

Next: *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”* Now the fruits of the Spirit begin to appear. Freed from our pride and self-righteousness we are no longer slaves to self-indulgence, self-esteem and SELF-ishness. Rescued from the worship of our SELVES, we are free to truly worship God and love our neighbor in Spirit and truth. And as we show love, mercy and forgiveness to others we receive love and mercy and forgiveness from God, because when it comes to these things, God does unto us as we do unto others.

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”* The Greek word “καθαροι” means “clean” as well as pure. *“Blessed are those whose hearts are clean, for they shall see God.”* This is why, after his sin with Bathsheba against Uriah the Hittite, David prayed, *“Create in me a clean heart O God and renew an upright spirit within me; cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me.”* (Psalm 51:10-11) God cannot be in the presence of sin, so our hearts have to be made clean and pure if He is to live in us. Now this poses a huge problem for us, because our hearts are not just tainted with sin, they are the wellsprings, the fountainheads of our sins. Jesus said, *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man unclean...”* (Matthew 15:19-20) Does this mean that as long as our hearts are sinful—which means as long as we inhabit this flesh—we cannot gaze upon the face of God? Has Jesus promised a gift to us that we cannot obtain in this lifetime? Not at all. As we practice kenosis and empty ourselves of our pride and the illusions it has nurtured in us, we can begin to discern the face of Christ in those around us—in the widow, the prisoner, the hungry, the lame. And when we see the face of Christ, we are seeing the face of God, for as Jesus said, *“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”* (John 14:9)

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”* Here Jesus speaks of peace between man and God—the peace of which the angels spoke to the shepherds outside Bethlehem when they sang, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to those on whom his favor rests.”* This is the peace that Jesus gave us when he demolished the barrier of sin that separated us from God by paying its full penalty on our behalf. It is

the peace that comes to all who hear and believe the Gospel, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is the peace that is preached to all nations by those who proclaim that Gospel, who bring the Good News to those whose eternal destinies depend on whether or not they hear it. *“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace and bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation....”* (Isaiah 52:7)

Finally, and perhaps most difficult of all for us to grasp, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”* This is a blessing which, frankly, few of us receive in this life. Yet the fact that it is indeed blessing has been evidenced by the lives and deaths of Christian martyrs for two thousand years—beginning with the Apostles and continuing through a great cloud of witnesses who died under persecution and torture and who still do. They knew whom they were living and dying for just as He had lived and died for them. Blessed indeed to reach the point where you are so emptied of yourself that you welcome the chance to give all you have for Christ and his Kingdom.

I have a four-year-old grandson who loves trucks. He has more toy trucks than I can count. He knows all their names—dump trucks, big rigs, semis, crane trucks, tank trucks and so forth. His very favorite are...garbage trucks. He LOVES garbage trucks because they pick up the yuckies and take them to the dump. One of his favorite games is to fill up a toy garbage truck he has with whatever he can fit into it and then joyfully dump it out. This kid knows all about kenosis! He's forever getting rid of the bad, knowing that there is good just around the corner.

The Beatitudes offer us much more than mere gems of wisdom: they portray a soul coming to life as the debris of selfish ambition and vain conceit are emptied out so that God can come in to dwell. Blessed are all those who seek Christ through kenosis, for they will find Him.

Amen.