

January 29, 2017
Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

“Spiritual by Christ”

Matthew 5:1-12

I know that being judgmental is supposedly one of the worst offenses a person can commit in today’s culture. But my common sense tells me that we all constantly make judgments and judgment calls. It’s one of our survival skills. It’s simply what people do.

There is a certain phrase people say to me sometimes in conversation when they discover that I’m a pastor. And as soon as they say it, it triggers a judgment call in the back of my mind. That judgment is something like this: You’re a whack-a-doodle who has no concept of the reality of what you’re about to talk about. The phrase that triggers such a judgment? “I’m a very spiritual person.”

You see, most often when this phrase is utilized it is followed by the person talking about their virtue of being spiritually attuned to god, or to nature, or to the nether realms or some such thing. They will talk about how the spirit has been leading them here or there, guiding them in some endeavor in their life. They will talk about their feelings—which amazingly always coincide and mirror the activity of this “spirituality”. They will talk about beliefs in the way the universe works—beliefs based not on any foundation other than that of their own mind.

And more often than not, when someone says “I’m a very spiritual person,” at some point in the conversation that ends up being what they consider a very good reason why they don’t need to be in church on Sunday. They are “in a good place spiritually.” They feel that they are “right with god,” whatever that god might be. They are full and content when it comes to “spirituality”.

And I really wish I could say this was only folks outside the church, but it’s not. I’ve run into Lutheran “spiritual people” who just know that God wants them to be happy, and He is guiding them to financial prosperity or some such worldly thing. I’ve dealt with “very spiritual” Christians who are very angry with God because they know in their heart that they deserve better than they’ve been dealt. Sometimes they “spiritually” are sure that God is going to heal them or make things better, or they think if they can just become “spiritual” enough, God will act.

I think I’m justified in my knee-jerk whack-a-doodle judgment call because Jesus is rather explicit; *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

Generally speaking I find that people who say “I’m a very spiritual person” believe they have something “spiritual” in and of themselves that they are bringing before God. It might be their faith, their own righteousness or their intense emotional experience toward God. I kid you not, there are people walking around who believe if they carry the correct combination of different rocks and crystals it makes them spiritually right with god or the universe or whatever!

But whatever it is, their attitude is that they are “spiritual” and therefore have something to offer God, some merit, some standing before Him. In some way, they bring a blessing—their blessing...of spirituality.

When Jesus says “blessed” what is He talking about? He most certainly is not talking about food, possessions, wealth, health, feelings, enlightenment and wisdom or any other such thing. In the context of the Christ of God come to humanity to save them from their sins there is only one meaning, one truth, of which “blessed” speaks: being saved, being redeemed.

And why are the blessed those who are poor in spirit? Because they are needy. They know their sin and know before a Holy God they stand spiritually bankrupt. They have nothing

to offer; no rightness with God, no “peace with the universe.” They don’t say, “God, look what I bring to the mix.” They say God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

Later on in Matthew’s Gospel John the Baptist sends some messengers to inquire of Jesus, if He is the Christ or not and part of His reply is that *“the poor have good news preached to them.”*

That good news has absolutely nothing to do with anything they have brought to the table. These “poor” are counted with the blind receiving sight, the lame being made to walk, the lepers being cleansed, the deaf being made to hear...the dead being raised to life. The good news is that those completely incapable of helping themselves are being served by the Son of God. The good news is that God’s Christ is becoming our righteousness where we have none. The good news is that God’s Son shall step under the Father’s wrath and punishment on the cross because we do not have any bit of “spirituality” that can stand there and survive, much the less triumph. The good news is that the Son will rise to perfect and eternal life where we just would remain dead and separated from God for eternity. The good news is that the Holy Spirit calls us to a faith that receives all of these gifts of Christ by making the good news very clear: We need them. God gives them.

So brothers and sisters in Christ gathered here today, I just want to remind us all why we are here today. We are here because we are needy. We are not here because we are good Christian people who have praise, honor and spirituality to come before a Holy God. We come here because we are poor, miserable sinners bereft of any gift or spirituality worthy of God, and we need to be blessed, to be saved, to be redeemed.

And in His mercy, God makes a judgment call. He judges. He damns our sin in Christ crucified. In that judgment, He clears to path to lovingly, perfectly and wholly filling our need and blessing us. St. Paul writes that *“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”* St. John writes, *“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”* Jesus Himself tells of our need He fills in Holy Baptism, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*

We who are poor, empty, bankrupt in Spirit, receive the spirituality of God: His Holy Spirit! When the Father looks upon us in judgment He now sees His own image in Christ Jesus; a true man who kept God’s precepts, remained perfectly faithful and is truly righteous. We are judged “not guilty” because God Himself has made us Spiritual.

So please, don’t ever say “I’m a spiritual person.” Saying that only points to yourself and it doesn’t make you look good; it makes you look like a whack-a-doodle who doesn’t really know what they’re talking about. It’s a self-glorifying claim that makes me think you’re full of something all right, but it’s not the Spirit.

If you’re going to go there get the facts straight and say, “The Father has filled my need. Jesus Christ is abundant where I am lacking. I have been gifted the Holy Spirit.”

When we come before God, we don’t have anything, and that’s good, because God gives and the needy are those who faithfully receive. Be a needy receiver.

And next time you do run across a self-proclaimed “spiritual person,” remember these words of Jesus and speak the truth: “I am poor in spirit, but I stand blessed in Jesus.”

Amen.