

When I was in school,
the worst way
any class could begin,
was for the teacher
to look up from their desk,
and coolly announce,

“Today we are going to have
a pop quiz.”

The groaning that followed,
I can still hear it.

I hope there will be no groaning,
but today,
we are going to have a pop quiz.
A biblical one.
Take heart, it will not be graded.

First question is easy -
how many books make up
The Old and New Testaments together?

And of those,
how many in the New Testament?
For you people you can do math
in your heads,
how many does that leave
for the Old Testament?

Now, here's the tricky one -
the bonus question,
if you will -

Where do we first get the list,
of those 27 books in the New Testament?

The 39th Festal Letter of Athanasius,
Bishop of Alexandria,
written in 367.

We have 45 letters from Athanasius,
The primary purpose of which
was to announce the date of Easter,
but that's not the point of this sermon.

I bring it up because
since nearly the beginning of Christianity,
we have used Scriptures,
that contain four different
accounts of the Gospel.

Pet Peeve -
we do not say The Gospel of Matthew;
it's always The Gospel of Jesus Christ,
according to whichever evangelist
we are reading.

It's worth wondering why we have four accounts,
especially since they do not always agree, and in fact,
they sometimes contradict each other.

But since the beginning of The Church,
we seemed to know
that we needed these different accounts.

They were written for different purposes,
Each one has something
different to teach us
not just about what Jesus did,
but about who he was,
and about why he did what he did.

We'll dig into that more
at other times,
but it's important to remember,
because today we heard
a part of the Gospel story,
that we typically call
the Beatitudes.

And specifically,
We heard Matthew's version.

Luke has one, too,
and while they are very similar
in some ways,
they are also strikingly different.

Sometimes we seem to gloss over
or forget about the differences,
but they must have some meaning,

or else The Church wouldn't
have kept both.

Matthew's version is often described
as more spiritual than Luke's
and Luke is more earthy.

For instance, today we heard Jesus say

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
whereas in Luke, it's simply,
Blessed are the poor.

Again, in Matthew, Jesus says
Blessed are those who hunger
and thirst after righteousness,
While in Luke it's
Blessed are those who are hungry now.

For now, don't worry too much
about why they are different;
i just want us to think about
what Jesus says in Matthew
without confusing it with Luke.

Jesus is not talking about the poor
or the hungry,
not today.

When we hear Luke's version,
we'll think about what Jesus
says to us about the poor,
The hungry, and the oppressed,
but for today,
Jesus is talking to us
rich and poor alike,
about our spiritual condition.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit,
Jesus begins:
so what exactly does that mean,
to be poor in spirit?
It's not that we understand
what it means to be poor,
so that we can be more
compassionate and generous
although that's noble.

Compassion and generosity
are some of the marks
of a follower of Jesus,
But i think what Jesus
is talking about is
something else -
he's talking spiritual poverty.

Remember where we are
Jesus has been baptized and tempted,
he's called his disciples to him,
And the first thing he tells them
about being his disciples,
is being poor in spirit.
It's the starting point
of everything else that follows.

It's where they begin as his followers,
which means it's where we begin as well.

Spiritual poverty is about our utter dependence upon God alone,
For all that we need,
and all that we want.
It is also the awareness
of our *need*
for that dependence on God alone.

Spiritual poverty
is the understanding
that for us to be truly happy -
truly blessed, as the Gospel says -
that we let go of any idea

That our joy, our hope, our life,
our salvation can come from
anything other than God.

Think for a moment,
of all the ways,
we try to fill our lives
with things that aren't God,

The things we think,
Will make us happy,
or fulfilled, comfortable, or secure.
If you made a list of those things,

what would be on it?

What sorts of things,
do we seek after,
in our attempt to be truly happy?

And, if we're honest,
where on that list,
would we put God?

A closer, more intimate,
and more authentic relationship
with God?

Because That, brothers and sisters,
is the only thing
that can every really satisfy us,
although we often don't realize it.

St. Augustine said best -
You have created us for yourself,
O God, and our hearts are restless,
until they find their rest in you.

Being poor in spirit,
means recognizing that restlessness,
and being willing to empty ourselves
of all things that are not of God,
so that God can fill us with
that are -
all truly good and holy things.

Being poor in spirit,
is the way we come to
hunger and thirst not just
for any food and drink
but for the Bread of Life
and the cup of salvation.

It is how we learn to become
merciful, and pure in heart,
how we learn to be peacemakers,
to be called children of God.

This emptying of self,
makes our lives empty vessels,
vessels that God can transform,

into lives that look an awful lot
like the life of Jesus,

And that, after all,
is the goal of a disciple -
to pattern one's own life
after the life of the Master we follow.

As we begin anew,
this walk with Jesus towards the cross,
he asks us to choose spiritual poverty,
to rid ourselves of anything
and everything that stands
between us and him.

It can seem like an impossible task,
and left to our own strengths,
it is.

But Jesus doesn't ask us
to do it on our own,
he simply invites us,
as he invited his first disciples,
to follow where leads,
to place our lives in his hands,
and to allow him to do with us
as he will.

He asks us to offer our lives to him,
as he offered his life for us,
it's an offering that will cost us,
well, everything.

And that's okay,
For then we will be poor in spirit,
and we will be blessed,
for ours will be the Kingdom of Heaven.