

“Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 30, 2011
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Holy Scriptures: Psalm 15 Matthew 5: 1-12 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10

Psalm 15

A Psalm of David.

¹ O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
³ who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;
⁴ in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the LORD;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
⁵ who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.

The Beatitudes

Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

2 Corinthians 12: 7-10

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹ but he said to me, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”** So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults,

hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

The Word of God comes to us, speaking words of wisdom, saying,

***“My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness.” --2 Corinthians 12: 8***

When I got my hair cut this week
the hairstylist asked what I was preaching on today.
I said, “Actually, I am going to speak on the subject matter of suicide.”
Without a moment’s hesitation she said, “I have considered it several times.”

Yes, many of us have considered ending our lives.
Many of us have been affected
by the suicides of beloved family members and friends;
we’ve been touched
by those who have intentionally ended their lives and broken our hearts;
we have had second chances
to confront the demons that seek our souls
when suicide is attempted and “failed”;
and we’ve been impacted personally and collectively
by those who have taken other people’s lives while taking their own.

This message is an offering to the church:
on this day let us break the silence and start the conversation.
As the late Archbishop Oscar Romero pointed out,
no single prayer can lift up all our concerns,
no solitary program can meet every church need,
and no one sermon can address all that must be said.

This morning’s message cannot say everything we need to hear,
but we can – and must -- say something.
With this in mind, we open the conversation;
we break the ice;
we overcome our fears;
we give voice to our heartache
and unanswered, never asked questions regarding suicide.

***“[God’s] grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness.”***

Last autumn a dozen young people across our nation’s landscape
ended their own lives because they were bullied and felt picked on.
Some of our teenage neighbors were gay;
all of them were and are children of God.

When a young boy in Decatur arrived at home
after being bullied in elementary school because his backpack was pink,
he went into his bedroom and hung himself.
First Christian Church of Decatur immediately opened our doors
for an evening service of prayer and public advocacy,
and over 200 neighbors filled the pews.
My friends, our community is hurting;
our community is in need of healing;
and our community is seeking hope.
May the Church of Jesus Christ offer a word of grace,
share a balm of healing and extend a hand of hope.

Yushi Nomura studied the Wisdom Sayings of the Desert Fathers
and drew images to accompany their wise teachings.
For example, Yushi Nomura drew a picture
of a fellow floating in air and reaching up to the clouds,
and as he attempts to get into heaven
he is being tugged by the foot by a determined guy
holding on with both arms.

*"The old men used to say:
If you see a young person climbing to heaven by his own will,
hold him by the foot,
and pull him down to the ground,
for it's just not good for him."*

Our Desert Fathers put suicide in a new light.
As well as our possible role...

Life is too precious,
our options and possibilities so boundless,
and the love of God so dear and God's people so near
that, as our spiritual ancestors said,
suicide is just not good for us or anyone else as well.

***"[God's] grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness."***

We are blessed to have a role in saving a life (our own or someone else's);
in offering someone a second or third or umpteenth chance at redemption;
and to take the blessed opportunity to intervene.

There is a definite relationship between suicide and community,
between what leads a soul to attempt to end his or her life
and our social and spiritual connections with the whole people of God.

According to the late Henri Nouwen,
community is best understood as a quality of the heart.

Nouwen said, "The word *community* has many connotations,
some positive, some negative.
Community can make us think of a safe togetherness,
shared meals, common goals, and joyful celebrations.
It also can call forth images of sectarian exclusivity, in-group language,
self-satisfied isolation, and romantic naiveté.
However, community is first of all a quality of the heart.
It grows from the spiritual knowledge that
we are alive not for ourselves but for one another.
Community is the fruit of our capacity
to make the interests of others more important than our own.
(The Apostle Paul said, "Let each of you look not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others." Philippians 2:4)

The question, therefore, is not "How can we make community?"
but "How can we develop and nurture giving hearts?"

Maybe this is what King David had in mind when he wrote Psalm 15.
The role of the poet in our midst is to speak words of beauty and strength
for the sake of building up the community,
to lend voice for the voiceless
and give hope to the hopeless.

King David was such a poet.
David entered the temple and lifted his eyes up to the heavens.
He prayed a hymn of ascent, singing,
"O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?"

These words echo across the ages.
Who abides here? Who dwells in your community?
Who is included and who is missing?
Who is being missed, ignored, left back, set back, set aside?

Who dwells here, O God, and what is our responsibility?
What does your community need from you?
What do you see that is lacking?
What would you like to contribute?

***"[God's] grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness."***

Jesus Christ also had a touch of the poet.
*"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain;
and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.
Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'"* -- Matthew 5: 1-2

Ever been poor in spirit? Been there; done that; bought the t-shirt.
Ever felt low? Melancholy? Depressed?
Ever look around and perceive that the world around you was in a constant state of fog?

Ever felt unlovable?
Ever thought you were being judged – unjustly, unfairly, impolitely judged –
by others and you let it affect your state of mind?

Remember what Jesus said about this state of being.
Jesus looked his followers in the eye and said,
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount preaches and teaches us
that people who are pronounced blessed
are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth,
but those whose only identity and security is in God.
Their identity is not in what they know,
but in having a certain spirit.
Their identity is not in what they know,
but in who knows them, who loves them,
who affirms their place in the kingdom of heaven
and in the community of faith.
Their identity is discovered afresh in the loving arms of a God
who sees us as we really, truly are,
and welcomes us, unconditionally, always and forever. Amen.

*“[God’s] grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness.”*

We saw a bumper sticker this week that reads, **“Non-Judgment Day is Near”**

Don’t ever judge anyone by what they have ever done at their worst or weakest moment.
All of us deserve grace.
God’s grace is sufficient.
We are defined by God.
None of us wants to be defined by one thing we have done.

Philippians 4 reads: *“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.
Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received
and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”*

Who among us has not thought about ending our life
due to something that happened or a bout of depression or deep anxiety?
Who among us has not spiraled down so low

that we have seriously contemplated suicide?

You have heard it said that suicide is a cry for help.
Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.
Suicide robs us of hope.

Good News!

In the name of Jesus Christ, know that there are always life-affirming options.

Options abound.

Options are God's gifts to a people who suffer from depression
and challenges with self-esteem and self-worth.

When life's circumstances close a door, God opens a window.

When all seems dark and desolate,

God's light shines through the cracks of our lives and offers hope.

Late one night the phone rang at my home.

Dan, a church member, called to tell me, his pastor, good bye.

He had had enough and was going to end his life.

I asked him to please wait

until at least I could get there and pray with him one more time.

When I arrived he was sitting on his couch with a .45 and a grim look.

He told me he had problems at home, no one else cared,

and there was only one thing left to do.

We talked and talked, and finally his hand on the gun relaxed.

I invited him to kindly take the bullets out of the gun.

He unloaded it onto the coffee table.

I picked up a bullet and held it out to him in my left hand,

and said that this was a possible choice, but that God had another option.

I reached out my right hand to him and said, "*Dan, in this hand is hope.*

I cannot promise that your family challenges will be resolved easily or quickly,

but I can promise you that your church and your God

will walk with you and love you.

You have the power to choose: death or hope."

Dan reached out and grabbed my right hand.

As we prayed we shed tears of relief.

When I prepared to leave his home I asked Dan for the bullets

and he gave them to me,

saying that he had several boxes more, but not to worry:

he would still be alive in the morning.

To this day I have one of the bullets as a vivid, visual reminder of the power of love.

In God's own timing Dan and his family worked out their challenges

and today they work and live together in Juno, Alaska.

That true church story has a happy ending,

yet the sad reality is that not all church stories do.

"[God's] grace is sufficient for you,

for power is made perfect in weakness.”

A young woman in our congregation named Keri
took her minister out to lunch in downtown Decatur.
I am sharing her name because her family wants her story told.
Keri and I visited and laughed as she shared stories of kayaking in Alaska,
and I admired aloud how well she was doing.
She told me all about having just come back from visiting her mother and her sister.
We prayed together in the church parking lot,
and then she got in her Saab and took off.
Three days later the call came in that she had committed suicide.
You see, in her anger and despair she had chosen to end her life,
and in her last week on earth felt a sudden, final sure of euphoria
at having arrived at a “solution”.
You know what she was doing in her last days, right?
She was saying good bye.
Tying up loose ends,
convincing herself that all would be well after she was gone,
and touching all bases before heading home.
The signs were there, and every one of us in her life
– her pastor, her mother, her sister, her husband, her friends, her church –
misread what was going on.
Since then we have confessed our sin and received assurance of God’s grace,
yet the pain and loss linger and remind us to be ever vigilant.

Healthy communities notice and reach out to unhealthy people.
People contemplate suicide when they think they are nobody;
that no one cares, that they won’t be missed
because they feel like no one is looking for them or looking out for them.

When asked “who is hurting?” healthy communities can identify a name and a face.
Healthy communities respond and act when asked
“who is missing?” “who is left out?” “who is abandoned?”
“who is being bullied and picked on?”
“who is being mistreated because he is gay and she is a lesbian?”
“who is depressed?” “who thinks she or he is a nobody?”

Healthy governments invest public resources in mental health facilities and treatment.
We have no excuse for our failure to address this pressing need.
The government is us, and mental health concerns cry out for help.

***“[God’s] grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness.”***

God invests in us.
God invests her saving, redeeming grace
to heal our troubled minds,

free us from demons,
connect us one to another,
and create vibrant, loving community.

In the context of a living, loving community we tap into God's grace and power.
Grace is love in action.

The active love of God will see us through anything and everything.
The Lord's power is perfected in weakness.

We need the help of God to be extricated from our weaknesses.

We cannot do it alone;
we need a power which is grounded in love
and fills our souls with hope.

We cannot do it alone;
we need one another, as family and friends and faith communities
to have and to hold, to nurture and support,
to laugh and to cry together.

Let us, each and every one of us,
look to God's healing, renewing grace to compensate for our weaknesses,
including the violence and harm we do to ourselves,
including the weakness neighbors experience
when they feel they have to take their own life.

When we do violence to one another or to our beautiful, God-made selves
we are to turn to God,
looking to God for compensation for our weakness,
and the harm we do.

Our job, or responsibility, our invitation here today is to recall God's grace,
grace which is sufficient for this and every time of need.

Dan seriously considered doing violence to himself.

Keri considered and then did violence to herself.

Neither is alone in this act.

We live and work and play in a violent world.

Let us not sit in judgment;

none of us is qualified or asked to do so;
none of us is perfect or can possibly know the burdens she carried.

Rather let us be bearers and sharers of grace, carriers of love in action.

God loves peace and reconciliation;

God abhors violence, and has shown us the ways to peace and wholeness.

One day the Son of God came in peace into Jerusalem,

praying that the people might find shalom, peace, spiritual wholeness in community,
but tragically Jesus was crucified on the cross on Calvary.

God suffered as Jesus Christ was crucified,

yet good came of it:

for by his sacrifice we are forgiven and have life everlasting.

And today we have His peace, the shalom of God.

God's love is stronger than the violence we do to one another and ourselves.
The grace of God is sufficient. Period.
Nothing, no matter how severe,
 can happen for which God does not provide a way out,
 a new exodus, a liberation of the body and soul and mind.

The ultimate victory is God's.
Grace, not sin,
 love, not hate,
 righteousness, not death,
 will have the last word.
 All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!