

November 5, All Saints A (Matthew 5:1-12)

## **Poverty of spirit, like any kind of poverty, is unenviable but survivable.**

by [J. Scott Turner](#) in the [October 10, 2017](#) issue

One of my favorite spiritual gatherings is marked by a lack of pretension of purity. The people there are poor in spirit; they're merciful; they mourn; sometimes they're even peacemakers. But pure? No way. All Ten Commandments and a bunch that aren't on the list have been broken by somebody present, and everyone knows it. Feigning a holy and righteous front will only garner laughter. Genuine persecution is not familiar here, though persecution complexes are.

It is a safe place to the extent that one recognizes the utter futility of self-righteousness. The emperor of self simply has no clothes—and this isn't a secret. It is a group of people who tell redemption stories as easily as they offer a handshake. Failure of almost any kind is met with worldly knowing, a weary sadness, and a helping hand. Mercy is given and received on an egalitarian basis of acknowledged personal failure. There is little notion of the morally superior granting a boon.

Poverty of spirit, like any kind of poverty, is an unenviable but survivable state of being. It is blessed not because it's desirable but because it is a state of potential, a prerequisite for appreciating a true richness of spirit, an abundant life. People who have crawled back from desperate poverty are usually incredibly grateful. Those who proclaim no need of God or some greater source of life, those who have been handed wealth or think they created it all by themselves, tend to be self-congratulatory, not grateful.

Jesus' reference to "the meek" is often interpreted as those who are socially, religiously, financially, and politically marginalized. But there is another sense of meekness: the sheepish admission of holding far too high an opinion of oneself. Some of us have never needed anyone but ourselves to put us on pedestals—or to knock us off so we feel the hard, unyielding floor that stops our fall. The meek are broken, and what the broken inherit is the human capacity to feel pain—the

precursor of healing. The earth is a healing factory; to inherit the earth is to have one's earthly life given back after nonfatal injury.

Discovering the world as a place of healing, restoration, rebuilding, and redemption—this is salvation, from soul-crushing cynicism and despair. Life, as evolutionary theory tells us, responds to injury with healing mechanisms. Life adapts.

For most living creatures, hunger and thirst are fundamental experiences. Like breath, the craving for sustaining elements of metabolism is universal among us. When Jesus uses this as a metaphor for the desire for right relationships with God and creation, he points to what's at stake here: life and death. Spiritual death is the loss of all relationality. Distorted relationships lead to spiritual illness, which feeds back into further distortion. Maybe this is original sin: that all humans are born into an environment of distorted relationships, which then distort the newborn's ability to adapt and grow.

Our underlying purity—our original righteousness—longs for this to be made right. "Who will save me from this body of death?" cries Paul. In our attempts to adapt, we often choose crude and ultimately destructive strategies which further distort. We substitute junk food for nourishment, alcohol and soda pop for clean water. We idolize sex, separating it entirely from love and mutuality, or we proscribe it with life-killing rules and expectations.

Distorted expressions of life-giving instincts distort the human spirit—which distorts relationships, which distorts any life-giving expressions and responses to the deepest and highest Spirit. The religions that purport to represent the deepest and highest are then distorted as well. How hopeless this all seems. How helpless we feel.

How much we then crave something to fill us. It is an astounding, life-restoring miracle of adaptability when this hunger and thirst are filled by the undistorted peace, mercy, and purity who is beyond all understanding. Can there be a love that can penetrate the distortions and fill us? Despair and cynicism say, "Abandon all hope." But people's redemption stories say otherwise.

And it is only the unrelenting, joyful telling of such stories, by those who have found and been found by this love, that can give hope back to the seemingly hopeless. *Unlife* will rage, revile, and persecute this hope. It will defend the distortions with all

the zeal of a death cult follower. *Unlife* will use violence, lies, seduction, disease, any means available to exterminate hope and abundant life. But rejoicing in the face of death is the witness of the martyrs.

Rejoicing is also the witness of the redeemed. My favorite spiritual gatherings are characterized by beatitudinal joy. They insist on hope and exhibit the healing power of love, forgiveness, and restoration. They consciously participate in spiritual adaptation. Distortion is never eliminated, but it can be put into remission. Remanded to the custody of the Spirit of all life, *unlife* is uncovered for the father of lies it really is. I pray you are able to participate in a beatitudinal community—for where two or three saints are so gathered, there is the Christ.