

**A Special Blessing**  
(Deut 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)

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3-9-25

The readings for this morning remind me of the first words that begin arguably Jesus's most important speech, "The Sermon on the Mount." "Blessed are the poor." Those are the first words that come out on that day.

I think that those words might have been meaningful to him partly because he had experienced what it was like to be a poor person when he was tempted in the desert.

He had not eaten for a long time and he was very hungry. He had no possessions to speak of and maybe a make shift shelter. And he was all alone, save for the presence of God. And because he knew what it is to be hungry, he also knew what it is like to be tempted.

But none of those temptations, the promise of a full stomach or power and prestige or divine protection from foolish decisions, could shake his faith. None of these temptations could separate him from something much more important, which he already had, and that was his humble relationship with God; as a lover of God's grace.

If you are like me, you may have had a period or two in your life when you experienced what it is like to be poor and to be hungry. But, like me, you live in the "land of milk and honey." And living with the comforts we enjoy, it is easy to forget those moments when we personally felt the reality of living in poverty. It is easy to forget what it feels like - to be alone, to be humiliated, to be hungry.

The first reading from Deuteronomy let's us know that holding on to this particular memory is important. It is so important that, every time the Israelites brought gifts to the altar, they were to recount in detail their own memory of when they had experienced being without. It was a ritual to be repeated and something we would benefit from emulating.

Because, when we remember what it was like to be without, we can understand, not only the needs, but the reality of others. We can experience compassion and grace. In some ways, I think that this kind of remembering is one of our most precious gifts.

Remembering the blessings of being poor keeps us humble and anchors us in grace.

I am not one to glorify poverty. Abject poverty is a terrible thing. But a while back, I saw a movie that reminded me of what a tremendous gift relative poverty can be.

Some people like movies that are packed with action and special effects. I like movies that many people consider boring, because the actors look like you and me and the events are every day events that take place slowly in a way that is closer to how reality really works. I like these kinds of movies, because I like subtlety. I like to be shown something extraordinary that is hidden in ordinary life.

In thinking about what it is like to be poor I remembered a movie called "A Beautiful Day" that I saw several months ago at the Amherst theater. It is a Japanese movie with subtitles about a bathroom cleaner in Tokyo.

Even I was starting to get bored at first, because the movie followed this man every day, as he went through the same routine. He folded

up his bedding, brushed his teeth, put on his toilet cleaning coveralls, bought a can of coffee from the vending machine, hopped in his car and drove to work.

And on the way, he would listen to music cassettes with great enjoyment. Songs like “There is a house in New Orleans, they call the rising sun.”

He had everything figured out in his routine. He kept his cleaning supplies perfectly organized and ready and a big bunch of keys hung on his belt to get into supply closets. And all morning he would go from one bathroom to the next, with total efficiency, making sure each one was thoroughly clean. At lunch time he would stop in a park to have a sandwich and collect saplings that he took home to grow in his tiny apartment; a sort of side hobby.

During the day, he would pause briefly to watch people and things going on around him with interest. He was quick to lend a hand when someone needed help. He would smile to himself when he saw something good happen. And he felt sad when he witnessed cruelty or suffering. So you get the idea. This was not a blockbuster. It was a very subtle movie.

You could say that he was a man who lived in relative poverty. He lived alone in a one room apartment on a back street. He had a very modest income; just enough to get by. His sister, who had married a wealthy man was ashamed of him and saw him as a failure. She felt that there was no possible upside to the way he led his life; that his walking around in coveralls with a toilet cleaning company logo on his back was shameful and a sign of flawed character; a sign that he was weak and unable to stand up for himself.

And it is true that he was socially shy and awkward, and that at times he felt very lonely. But even though he was pathetic in the eyes of his sister, behind his gentle exterior was a firm resolve that the life he was living was the life he needed live. He had an integrity and strength that came from knowing that his life was somehow leading him in a direction that was important to him.

And it was a life that brought him unexplainable moments lost in intense pleasure; like driving to work with the rising sun on his face while listening to a favorite song on the tape deck.

### **My Thoughts**

I'm not one to romanticize poverty, But that movie struck a deep chord in me. It reminded me of something I think we all need, living as we do in the "land of milk and honey." We need to be reminded that it is possible to live a full and joyful life with very little in terms of possessions or prestige. We don't actually need very much of any of the things that are wagged in front of us to tempt us.

We just need stable honest work that makes a contribution, a few simple possessions and to be kind in our relationships with others. What I found so inspiring is how the movie reveals something wonderful and extraordinary hidden in the ordinary: hidden in a low status job, in toilet company coveralls, in what to some might seem like an unfortunate circumstances, is a man who has his troubles and sadness like all of us, but who has these moments of deep joy, like a king on top of the world, because he experiences amazing grace in the ordinary events that make up his life.

Blessed are the poor! I think we tend to think of those words as describing people who lead wretched and unfortunate lives,

because we are constantly barraged with the idea that wealth and status are what makes a person whole and happy.

But the reality is that the experience of grace, which is the greatest and most freeing gift of all; the gift that makes us feel that we are living a life that is truly redeemed, does not come with wealth or prestige. In fact, having too much dulls our ability to experience grace

Blessed are the poor, in Spirit, he says, for theirs is the kingdom of God. These are good words to ponder during these days of Lent as we seek to be restored to the bedrock of our faith.