



## From the Pulpit: February 14, 2024

Ash Wednesday—Valentine's Day

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Matthew 5:3–12

### *God's Odd Benedictions, I: The Poor*

Thank you Carter, Margaret, and Elise for sharing Matthew's Beatitudes with us. Learning this scripture by heart in the 3rd grade has been a beloved tradition at Kenilworth Union for around 90 years. The Beatitudes are also as Bill mentioned, a required preaching topic for all clergy, and so today I begin our new Lenten sermon series "God's Odd Benedictions," with the first saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In the coming weeks Bill, Katie, and I will preach on each of these upside down and unusual blessings of Jesus.

Speaking of odd blessings, this is the 3rd [correction, 2nd] time in my 12 years of professional ministry that Ash Wednesday has fallen on Valentine's Day. With the preschool kids smiling and carrying their paper hearts home, and the sun shining brightly today, life feels pretty good right now. A few birds are back early and singing. Maybe you have a heart shaped chocolate cake from Portillos to share with our love waiting at home. If you are one of the Kansas City or Taylor Swift fans among us you have even more reason to celebrate.

As I approach this sermon I feel like Barbie when she interrupts the shiny, happy, perfectly pink dance party with her existential crisis. But as some clever social media creators have noted, you can't have "Valentine's without LENT" so here we are.

During Lent Christians traditionally take on a somber affect. The liturgical color changes to the more serious purple. In Children's Chapel we "pack away the alleluias" so that we will sing our praises with renewed joy on Easter. Many of us will live more simply by giving up a

treat like chocolate or an undesirable habit. The tone of our prayers becomes more repentant. And today we are marked with a cross of ashes and told we are dust.

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By our 3rd grade Bible count there are nine sayings of Jesus. We learn that each one has two parts: *A blessing and a promise*. We also remember that Jesus taught them in a specific place. You can visit the traditional site of the "Sermon on the Mount" today. This is a view of what it might have looked like if you were in the crowd listening to Jesus preach 2,000 years ago.

The third graders will also tell you that the secret to learning the unpatterned and unpredictable blessings of Jesus is to use these triangle memory cards which have a blessing on one side, the promise on the other, and when put in order become a mountain. When I asked them to tell me what it means to be "poor in spirit" here's what the 3rd graders told me:

- It means being in humble
- It means you don't have a lot of fancy stuff
- It is what you feel when something is really hard or sad

They also told me that being blessed means that you can still feel happy and content if you are poor in spirit because the kingdom of God is here, still growing like a tiny seed that will one day be big enough for **all** the birds of the air to find shelter in its branches, and **all** creatures to find shade under its canopy.

We should be proud of these young people who condensed 2,000 years' worth of Christian interpretation of this Beatitude into 150 words! Well done!

Dr. Rebekah Eklund is a theology professor who has written an *entire* book about the history of the meaning of the Beatitudes over two millennia. Since there isn't even agreement on how many Beatitudes there are: 8, 10, 7, or 9 it is not surprising that there are multiple interpretations of the first of these sayings of Jesus. Matthew's gospel begins "Blessed are the poor in spirit" Luke's Beatitudes say simply, "Blessed are you who are poor." Because of the difference between Luke and Matthew's gospels, good theologians have interpreted this odd blessing to mean different things: humility, being materially poor, or being oppressed by systems that won't stop pushing people down.

Ultimately Eklund suggests, that the myriad of possible meanings are a blessing that causes us to "stop in our tracks, making us wonder anew who are the poor and the poor in spirit today, and whether we might be among them, or not."<sup>1</sup> You would have plenty to ponder if your only Lenten practice was simply to ask yourself that same question each day: "who are the poor and the poor in spirit, and am I among them, or not?"

A financial firm did a pre-valentine's survey about love and money and reported that 26% of respondents said they would forgo love **for the rest of their lives** for an average net worth of \$128 million.<sup>2</sup> They didn't specify what kind of love -God's? -Our children's? -Our life partner's? But could you imagine giving even one of these kinds of love for a lifetime? Even for \$128 million? Are those who say money is more important than love, poor or poor in spirit? Both? neither?

On Ash Wednesday we force ourselves to face the transient nature of material things and the state of our spirits. We are made of dust. We make dust...with our car tires, bike wheels, and blue jeans. One day will become dust. But because God loves us, that's not the end of the story. Look around you and see what God is doing with dust! Galaxies swirl, precious babies enter this world, pollen rides the wind so that we will have spring flowers. Doctors take bits

of titanium and steel and use them to make us new elbows, hips, and rotator cuffs. God takes dust and fashions a kingdom of life and possibility. During Lent the Beatitudes invite, not command us, into God's flourishing.<sup>3</sup>

A few weeks ago I did something on my bucket list. I signed up for a pottery class—even though I've never used a pottery wheel and the last time I worked with anything claylike was in kindergarten. But I have always wanted to give wheel throwing a try. The first thing you learn is how to center the ball of wet dust. It requires total eye, hand, and foot coordination. All I can think about is keeping the blob of clay centered. By the end of the first class I made a wonky little bowl. It was supposed to be a cup. But I walked out to my car absolutely glowing. I remembered what it was like to have singular, undistracted focus. I remembered what it was like to have fun and feel joy.

So I've been practicing pottery, maybe a bit too much. After a month of classes, I'm almost good enough to say "I'm going to make a bowl" and then turn the blob into a bowl. I have a dozen little pots in the kiln this week. But not everything turns out. I looked through my pile of failures and decided this bowl looks the most poor in spirit. It is slumped down and wears a sad expression. There's a gaping hole where it was pressed on too hard.

But here's the amazing thing about clay: it can be made new again! But first you have to wait until it is dry enough to smash into dust. Then you wet it and wedge it and you will be able to work it into a new creation. Maybe I will turn my poor, slumpy bowls into an ash container decorated with stars and hearts perfect for the next Valentines/Ash Wednesday combo in 2029.

Out of love, God is continually recreating the broken dusty bits into a beautiful kingdom of love, peace, and flourishing for all. That's the blessing and the promise of Ash Wednesday's refrain: from dust you came and to dust you will return. Or as my colleague Wendy says, "For me, the cross of ashes I receive on my forehead is intimately connected with the cross we receive in the same spot at our baptism. Here's the heart of it: From Love we come, and to Love we return." Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Eklund, Rebekah. *The Beatitudes Through the Ages*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021, p 51.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.empower.com/the-currency/life/americans-spending-habits-valentines-day>

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<sup>3</sup>Rebekah, Eklund, p. 25.