

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

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Through the Eyes of a Child

Reflections on Matthew 5:1-16

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Katharine's favorite Christmas present was a new chalkboard and colored chalk. During January, Miriam (age 7) was coloring with the chalk, and as those of us who have used chalkboards know, chalk breaks. Katharine (age 5) was upset that her prized chalk had been ruined by her sister and chased her around the house yelling "chalk breaker. Miriam is a chalk breaker."

One Saturday morning when Miriam was four, we went to breakfast at the Cracker Barrel. She asked if we could go look at the toys while we waited for our order. We walked hand in hand past the greeter and the greeter kindly smiled at us and said to Miriam "how nice you are spending the day with grandpa." I smiled and Miriam gripped my hand and said defiantly to the woman "he is my papa not my grandpa." Later in our walk, she looked up and said "It's okay papa. You are not an old papa just a regular papa."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit." I must admit that I have struggled with this phrase. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? Some argue that it can mean blessed are those who are humble.

Okay', so what does it mean to be humble? Turning to the always reliable official guardian of the English language, dictionary.com it tells me:

1. not proud or arrogant; modest: to be humble although successful.
2. having a feeling of insignificance, inferiority, subservience, etc.: In the presence of so many world-famous writers I felt very humble.
3. low in rank, importance, status, quality, etc.; lowly: of humble origin; a humble home.
4. courteously respectful: In my humble opinion you are wrong.

This just confused me a bit more.

The [Contemporary English Version of The Holy Bible](#) gave me some clarity when they translated the first beatitude as:

"God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven"

Matthew 5:1-16(New York , NY: American Bible Society 1995)

Okay, so I should be humble and depend only on God. But what does that mean?

Pastor Paul gave me a copy of [The Message](#) which interprets the first beatitude as: "You're blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule."

Andy Alexander, Maureen McCann and Larry Gillick authors of [The Retreat in the Real World](#) argue:

Jesus attracts us to the fundamental desire of trusting in God. When we place our lives in God's hands, as Jesus did, we experience the vulnerability of that surrender. When all is gift, we can no longer measure ourselves by what we've accumulated. This poverty of spirit, and the freedom that comes with it, often feels wonderful.

Discussing that passage, I asked Pastor Paul what he believed it meant to be poor in spirit. He said that it means to empty ourselves, to hollow ourselves out. I asked him again, what does that mean? With his kind patient eyes, he looked at me and said "it means your daughter can be who she is and not who you want a daughter to be." This I can understand. She is a chalk breaker and as Katharine added on Monday morning a breakfast line cutter. At that moment I discovered a theme for today's chat.

I have had two significant religious experiences this fall that have focused a lot of my recent thought. The first was focused upon the concept of acceptance and the second on thankfulness. They have led to me my view of poor in spirit.

I have been participating in the retreat group on campus. Early in the retreat I read a piece by Peter Van Breeman entitled the [Courage to Accept Acceptance](#). He argues:

Every human being craves to be accepted for what he is. Nothing in life has such a lasting and fatal effect as the experience of not being completely accepted...Acceptance means that the people with whom I live give me a feeling of self-respect, a feeling that I am worthwhile."

In other words we crave meaningful relationships where love means acceptance, flaws and all. This genuine acceptance is not blind acceptance as he continues:

To accept a person does not mean that I deny his defects, that I gloss over them or try to explain them away. Neither does acceptance mean to say that everything the person does is beautiful and fine. Just the opposite is true. When I deny the defects of the person, then I certainly do not accept him. I have not touched the depth of that person. Only when I accept a person can I truly face his defects.

He concludes that we must be willing to see and accept that God accepts us each for who we are and loves us no matter what. It also means that we need to accept rather than define others. It is too easy for us to define a person by what they do. It is especially easy when there is a fault.

- Miriam is a chalk breaker.
- The student who committed an act of Academic Dishonesty is a cheater.
- The person who disagrees with me is a trouble maker.
- The student who fails a class is a failure.
- The politician who cries when emotional is unstable or weak.

On the other hand, acceptance, when given to me, allows me to be a regular dad and not an old dad. It allows Miriam and Katharine to find themselves in the world and know that I will accept them no matter what. It means that a student can have the freedom to fail a class and still be a valued person.

A component of this concept of acceptance means that I humble myself or empty myself to realize that what I have is a gift from God. Some of those gifts have been used wisely, some squandered, some yet unrealized, but gifts none the less.

This leads to my second experience. We had a Dominican priest visit our parish this fall and preached about prayer. He said that he begins each day in prayer thanking God for the gifts he has been given. At first I thought of course we thank God for the blessings he has given us. "bless us oh lord and these thy gifts" "thank you for the food that nourishes our lives". "thanking God Augustana for the." He then talked more about genuine thanks. The type that is specific. He proceeded to present a three minute personal list as an example. What he was saying was that we often pray for things we want and desire in the future, rather than offer a prayer of thanksgiving which recognizes the abundance that we have. It is very easy us for us to want more and be envious of those who have more while being blinded to the fact that there are many who have less. As a college we wish for things that some of our sister institutions have. We want new buildings, higher salaries, more staff, more scholarship, higher ACTs. This is a good thing and an admirable goal as long as we also realize what have. That we realize there are an equal number of our sister institutions that pray to have what we already have. I badly want new desks in the Humanities classrooms. They are at least forty years old, really uncomfortable, and dated. While I wish for new desks I also thank God for the students who sit in them. Our desks are old because they are like new. Unlike other places I have visited, Augie students are less likely to write graffiti on the desk tops, carve their initials into them, or break them. So what seems like a curse has a hidden blessing.

This week we have a whole lot to be thankful for. Our band students were able to safely escape a potentially difficult situation through the hard work of a lot of caring people. The Augustana people here and in Egypt acted with a caring compassion that we are known for. As hard as it is for me to acknowledge, Senator Thune deserves our gratitude as he effectively exerted his influence. They survived a crisis of global dynamics and were delivered home safely to us. We should be rightfully thankful and we are. However, I am even more thankful for this day. I have been at Augustana for decades and we have faced weather conditions like this before as the semester began and we have always started on time.

As I watched the events in Egypt unfold I prayed for safety. I must admit I checked regularly over the weekend to see the updates and we cheered when the flight left the airport. At the same time I watched the weather thinking why do I live here and man it is going to be cold. I did not fully think about travel or the risks our students would take in the name of higher learning. I thank God that some one said, just as we want to get the band out safely we too need to be concerned about those driving through blizzard conditions. We need to be as thankful for the little things as well as the big things.

Getting back to where we began. I believe that poor in spirit can be interpreted thusly: Blessed are the poor in spirit for they accept others and have the courage to be accepted by others and their God. They are thankful for that which they already have been given and the kingdom of heaven becomes theirs.