

## Congratulations, You Poor!

The Rev. Whitney Roberson  
February 14, 2010 - Epiphany 6c  
Church of the Redeemer

*Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings. Jeremiah 17:5-10*

*He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.' Luke 6:17-26*

This past week the Redeemer book club discussed a novel called *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. I had planned to be there until fatigue born of an overly-busy schedule slowed me down a bit. But I did read the book and found it very moving: it's set in the Fifties and early Sixties in Jackson, Mississippi and tells the story of three women – two African-American maids and one young white woman of privilege – who find themselves unlikely allies serving the truth of their divided community. Against amazing odds, they write a book together that tells what it's like to be the "colored" help of a white community virtually unaware of what its privileged status costs those who serve it.

I finished the book and then I turned to today's lessons: to Jeremiah and this incredible image: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord ... They shall be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes...; in the year of drought it is not anxious and it does not cease to bear fruit..." Set that next to Jesus' startling words -- "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" and we have enough to give us real pause. Because you see, my friends, despite the economic downturn, we are not poor; we are the privileged.

As I prepare today's sermon, I look around my bedroom where I'm working: there's stuff everywhere: several boxes of books and trinkets that need organizing, a basket of crosses I plan to arrange on my wall, sorted clothes waiting for their turn in the washer. Jesus' words trouble me

because, I see I have so much stuff – too much stuff. An emotion something like longing passes through me, but for what am I longing? "Blessed are you poor; for yours is the Kingdom of God." The fellows of the Jesus Seminar translate it: "Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you." And I remember how, last week, I explained that for "the Kingdom of God" or "God's domain" we might appropriately substitute, "power of God." So it becomes:

"Congratulations you poor! The power of God belongs to you...."

How can this be: the power of God belongs to the poor? What does this mean? I don't know, but it's a mystery I want to enter, and I wonder: within this mystery will I discover the meaning of my own longing?

Several years ago I went with a friend to the exhibit of Gees Bend quilts at the DeYoung Museum not far from my home. I hadn't actually planned to see the exhibit, but my friend was coming into the City for it and since I hadn't seen her in awhile, it seemed a good way to renew the friendship. What a gift that exhibit turned out to be! I'd been moved, not only by the beauty of the quilts themselves, but by the stories of the women who made them and I did something I rarely do: I bought the catalogue for the exhibit, which contained not only pictures of the quilts but those stories as well.

So when I read today's texts with the memory of *The Help* so fresh in my mind, the women of Gees Bend once again paid my soul a call. Those quilts, those women: hard lives, tragedy and sorrow, and yet from their poverty came beauty. Could their lives hold clues for us, help us to enter the mystery of God's Kingdom, the mystery of God's power? Can I learn from them something that will help me make sense of the longing I feel, help us make sense of our own lives...?

"I never had a child life," says Loretta Pettway, one of the quilters. "My mother leaved when I was 'round seven or eight. ... I had a lot of work to do. Feed the hogs, work in the field, take care of my handicapped brother. Had to walk about fifty miles in the field every day." One thing is clear as I re-read the stories: lives of poverty are incredibly hard. If these women somehow managed to incarnate the values of God's Kingdom, it was not because their lives were easy. But having few choices, they made the most of them.

"I made my quilts out of old shirts and dress tails and britches legs," Loretta continues. "I couldn't never get no good fabric to make quilts, so I had to get the best of the old clothes my peoples wore or old clothes I got from other peoples... I had to piece things the way I could see to do..."

"The way she could see to do" resulted in five of the most amazing quilts in the exhibit, works of art that give visual representation not only to her hard life, but to a spirit of strength and courage that became an inspiration to all those who see them.

"Congratulations, you poor! God's power belongs to you."

"God brought me from a mighty long ways," this same woman reflects. "I prayed to the Lord when I was growing up that it won't be this way always. I am looking for a brighter day, a better day."

And I say, 'Lord, let my last days be my best days,' and he have fulfilled it...."

Can you hear it? Can you hear Jeremiah whisper in your ear, "Blessed are those whose trust is in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream..." Why do I feel like weeping?

You see, the poor know their need of God. We're all poor in a way, but some of us – most of us here, I'm guessing – don't know it, don't see our poverty, don't know our need of God. Our stuff distracts us and makes it hard to see how God is – always – holding us. But the quilters of Gees Bend knew it: they had only the Lord in whom to trust:

"When I was growing up, we didn't have a father," says China Pettway, "My mother raised ten children without a father, but God was our father, and I thank the Heavenly Father because my mother struggled. But we made it. ... I'm a home-health care worker now. ... I love my patients and I think they are the most sweet and beautiful people that you can meet..." China Pettway is a gospel singer as well as a quilter: "I always enjoy singing," she enthuses: "I just love the Lord and I love people..."

("Congratulations, you poor! God's Power belongs to you.")

One of the things that strikes me as I read their stories is the way these women, hard as their lives of poverty were, never lost their sense of themselves, of the value of their own ideas and feelings. Their quilts anchored their identity, becoming vehicles of creative self-expression: "self-portraits," one art critic calls them. It's as though the quilts incarnated the freedom these women found within themselves, even as the oppressive culture of the Deep South of their day refused to acknowledge their identity or accord them the right of self-expression in other ways.

"I just always like to form my own opinion about my work," Flora Moore tells the interviewer. "I just put a piece together, see how it look and if it don't look right, take it loose and do it over again.... You might know how somebody else do it, but you tell yourself, I'm going to do it different."

Arlonzia Pettway tells how her mother-in-law mentored her, encouraging her to trust her own instincts:

"You don't have to worry yourself trying to make any of those things you got to follow a pattern for. Just take what you know and do what you want to'," she was told. "And that's what I did and it's a good way, too.... I learnt myself to follow my head."

These women trusted themselves.

"Congratulations, you poor! God's Domain belongs to you."

I wonder what it is that anchors our identity; helps us to find the way that's right for us...?

But you know, while piecing their quilt tops was a highly individual matter, the process of stitching the quilt was communal endeavor:

"One time me and I think it was about five of us started to quilting from one house to another," remembers Sue Willie Seltzer. "Quilt one or two for one person, go to the next house, do the same thing...."

In this, the quilters mirrored the value of mutual support deeply embedded in their community's way of life. Mary Lee Bendolph insists, "We have a good community. I thank the Lord for the peoples here. ... When I went to Connecticut, they was pretty good in the part I was in, but they don't do for each other. My son and I watched this white man trying to move this big old rock... and I told my son, 'Go help that white man.' And he say, 'Mama, you don't help nobody here; you ain't in the country.' I went out there and say to the white man, 'You want me to move that block? You want me to show you how?' He say, 'How you know about that?' ... I say, my mama taught me."

Speaking of her youth, Arlonzia Pettway describes how people routinely came together to help one another: "Every family built their own log cabin. The family would get together; all the men would help. They would do it for each other for nothing. ... They went from one place to another. If you needed something, they do it for you - no charge." The people of Gees Bend knew the value of community.

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In every story I read, a beatitude embodied: "My mama was a hardworking woman, all I know. Had sixteen heads of children and kept us all working hard in the field. She learned all of them how to work and take care of themselves.... She was a good neighbor to peoples – always giving. Used to love to cook teacake and share with the community. Every weekend, children visit each other house, and she feed every one of them...."

"Congratulations, you hungry! For you will have a feast."

Another page and another quilt of old work clothes: blocks of gray stained with the red earth of Gees Bend set off by others of blue denim and the red cotton of an old work shirt. The caption is tiny; I put on stronger glasses so I can read it. It's Arlonzia Pettway again, describing the quilt made by her mother: "It was when Daddy died. I was about seventeen, eighteen. He stayed sick about eight months and passed on. Mama say, 'I going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love.'"

"Congratulations, you who weep now! You will laugh."

You know, my friends, I don't pretend to understand this Mystery Jesus called the Kingdom of God. For the people of his day as for us, his words are puzzling, unsettling, turning upside-down and inside-out what we think we know about what matters most. Recalling the stories of the quilters of Gees Bend, though, I feel like I'm coming close to this mystery, for their lives of poverty nevertheless lives of faith, of creativity, of strength and courage, of self-worth, of love and

community; lives through which the power of God shines. Reading their stories, I find myself praying: Lord, show me how to be poor that Your kingdom might shine through me; teach me to be hungry, for I long to feast; give me the courage to weep for love, that I may learn to laugh for joy."

I wonder: will you join me in this prayer...?