Sunday, February 1, 1987
A DIFFICULT ADMISSION
Matthew 5:1-12

Text: Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

As a young minister in my first parish, I believed I could help anyone. There was no problem I couldn’t solve. That was before I met Lester. He was married, and they had three children. As a family, they had lots of problems. One of the main problems was that Lester was an alcoholic, but he would not admit it.

It was not unusual for me to get a telephone call from Lester at 3:00 a.m. telling me that he was drunk and needed a way home. Or his wife, Helen, might call to tell me that he had arrived home drunk and that she had locked him out of the house.

When Lester was sober, he was a wonderful person, and we talked for hours on end. But the promise was always broken. His wife left him. He would be sober for a while, and she would return. But then he would be drinking again. Sometimes, I would let him sleep off his drunkenness in the spare bedroom of our home. Then, when he was sober, I would give him something to eat and send him home.

Lester’s excessive drinking began to cause severe health problems. He got bleeding ulcers and one time almost died from the loss of blood. Another time, he was found unconscious in a drainage ditch by the highway. He had been there for hours. Somehow, he recovered after a short stay in the hospital.

One afternoon, he stumbled into my office drunk again. His wife had taken the children and left their home. I called her at her parents’ house, and she said she was not coming back this time. She had had enough.

“I want to stop drinking,” Lester told me. He was crying. I told him what I had said many times before: “Only Alcoholics Anonymous can help you. There’s nothing more I can do for you except to see that you get in touch with A.A.” I volunteered to call the A.A. telephone number for him. This time, he said okay. I got an A.A. member on the phone and told the man that I had someone in my office who desperately needed help. Could he come? The man said that he would not come to my office unless Lester himself would tell him on the phone, in his own words, that he needed and wanted help.

I gave the phone to Lester and said, “If you want help, you have to ask for it in your own words.” He took the phone from me, and with great effort, he forced himself to say, “I need and I want help.” The man on the other end of the line said he would be at my office in twenty minutes, and he was.

Lester had, at last, made the most difficult admission: “I need help.” He was finally ready to admit, “I have a problem, and it’s a problem that I can’t solve by myself.” I also had learned that I needed help in helping Lester.

But Lester is not alone. Most of us have difficulty admitting that we need help. We like to think that we are completely self-sufficient, that there is no problem we cannot handle on our own.

However, there come times in all of our lives when we need to be able to say openly to ourselves, to God, and to someone we trust, “I need help. I can’t do it alone.” That’s the first step toward healing and wholeness.

I believe that’s why, in the Gospel according to Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins the Beatitudes with the statement, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The “poor in spirit” are those who are willing to recognize their own need for help. To be poor in spirit is to be aware of one’s weaknesses and imperfections, one’s inward poverty.

Some years ago, I had a letter from a young woman. In the letter, she described how her life was coming apart. She had recently been divorced, then had fallen ill and was hospitalized. She lost her job. Her closest relatives lived over a thousand miles away. She described how lonely she was. Her life, she said, had lost all meaning. She signed her letter simply, “Help me!”

Everyone is poor in his or her own way. Yours may be vocational poverty. You may not be happy in your job, or if you’re young and just starting out, you may be wondering what you should do with your life. The most difficult part is admitting to oneself and someone else you trust that you are having trouble finding your way.

Many times, we have difficulty in asking for help in even the simplest things. Let’s say you’re on a trip in your car and you’ve been driving most of the day following the maps you’ve gotten from AAA. But then something unexpected happens. As you approach a major city, a sign tells you, “Road construction for the next 30 miles,” and it wasn’t marked on your map. The signs detour you on some unknown state route and then on some country roads. Before you know it, you are lost. What do you do? Do you drive for an hour and try to find it on your own even though you know you’re lost? Or do you stop at the first gas station and ask for directions?

This problem was presented to 100 men and 100 women in a Midwestern city, and would you believe only 10% of the men replied they would ask for help immediately, while 21% of the women said they would ask for help rather than drive around lost. The revealing fact is that the overwhelming majority of men and women would rather drive around lost than admit they needed help.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who are not afraid to admit they need help, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We are blessed when we are poor enough to swallow our pride and humbly ask for assistance.

To be poor in spirit does not mean that we have a weak faith, but rather it’s a recognition that we are not self-sufficient, a recognition that God has so made the world and us so that we are connected to each other and interdependent.

Most of us, as children, were not afraid to ask questions about something we didn’t know and we were not hesitant in asking for help. But when we reached adolescence, we had more difficulty in admitting any weakness or poverty.

Robert Schuller tells how he was too proud to ask for help as a young person. He had attended a tiny country school in Iowa, which did not offer geometry. When he started his

undergraduate studies at Hope College in Michigan, everyone was required to take eight hours of science, and math courses were counted as helping to fulfill that requirement.

So he found himself in a math course. The first week, the professor rattled off some statements which referred to geometric principles. Because he had not studied geometry, he didn't know what the teacher was talking about. He noticed that the other students were nodding as if they completely understood, so he did as they did, thinking, I'll pick it up later. The next week was the same. He didn't have the foggiest notion what the teacher was talking about, although he pretended he understood as clearly as the other students. But the truth of the matter showed up on his first test. He got a very poor grade. The professor asked him, "Are you having problems, Bob?" "Oh no," he said, "I'm doing fine." That was a lie. If he had been honest, he would've admitted that he had an enormous gap in his preparation for college. But he didn't want to admit this fact because he didn't want the teacher to know how dumb he was. Soon, he came to realize that this was one of the biggest mistakes he ever made. But it's a difficult admission, the fact that we need help.

Because it is so difficult for us to admit, those of us who want to be of help have to listen very carefully because frequently the request for help comes in an indirect way.

One day in a former parish, my wife answered the phone at home on a Saturday afternoon. The caller identified herself and asked to speak to me. I was not home, so Rowena continued to talk with the caller in an amiable way for a few minutes. At the end of the conversation, the caller said, "Oh, by the way, tell your husband I'm quitting the church," and she hung up.

Later that afternoon when I got home and Rowena reported the conversation to me with the ending statement — that got my attention. I telephoned the woman and suggested that we talk together in my office on Monday about whatever was bothering her. She agreed. When we met, she said nothing more about wanting to quit the church. Rather, she began to pour out her problems. It had been difficult for her to say the words, "I need help," but that's what her whole conversation was saying. Once she came to recognize this, she was ready to quit fighting herself, ready to quit putting all the blame on others, and to seek help for herself.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when you admit you need help. Blessed are you when you don't try to be an island and do it all by yourself. In all areas of life, the principle is the same: You begin to be blessed, you begin to find happiness when you are able to admit your need, when you admit where you are lacking and seek help to overcome that need. Alcoholics Anonymous has put this principle into its first step of the twelve steps: "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable."

The second step, after we have admitted our need for help, after we have acknowledged the fact that we cannot solve our problems all by ourselves, is to find someone who will listen to us and understand, and not be judgmental — someone who will listen in the spirit of love — it might be a friend, maybe one of the ministers in the church, a professional counselor, or a support group — the choices are many and God can work through any one of them.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The way any person begins Christian discipleship is by admitting his or her need. As long as we are self-satisfied, confident that we have all the answers, and completely comfortable with everything around us, we think we have no need of God or anyone else.

What will you do when your world tumbles in around you? What happens when tragedy strikes one of your children or someone else close to you? What do you do with a habit you have tried to break and nothing happens except the same old routine of disappointment and failure over and over again? What do you do when resentment builds up inside you so deep and strong and you've carried it so long that it almost chokes you to death? What do you do when you are afraid of any change which seems to threaten your established way of doing things?

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when you recognize and admit your poverty, when you admit you need help and then find someone to help you — the kingdom of heaven is yours.

What is the kingdom of heaven? To be in possession of the kingdom of heaven means to begin to come to an awareness and knowledge that God is with you — and that you are connected to God and to all others in God's creation — and that if God is for you, who can be against you? The kingdom of heaven means that you are sure now more than ever that God is ultimately in charge of all creation.

Everyone and everything is encompassed within the kingdom of heaven — but those who are poor in spirit possess it because they are aware of it; they recognize it, and they affirm their being a part of God's community.

To do otherwise is to submit to the kingdoms of this world and believe in their power, and the kingdoms of this world tell you, in contrast to the kingdom of heaven, that you don't need anyone else — that you are number one. You can possess the kingdoms of this world for a time, or a part of them, but they always perish. Only the kingdom of heaven is eternal, and you can possess it forever.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Amen.