

Blessed are the poor, hungry, hurting, and expendable. Woe to the wealthy, sated, happy, and popular.

I don't know about any of y'all, but this reading makes me extremely uncomfortable. I don't see myself on the favorable side of the scale in this one.

When I read this, I feel a bit like Jesus is steamrolling right over me. I feel flattened by him, because I sincerely desire to maintain right relationship with God, and it seems (according to this), I'm not doing it very well. Compared to so many others, I'm extremely wealthy, I've not been hungry in a long time (except by choice or by laziness), I find much to feel joyful about, and I feel well-supported and cared for. I don't consider myself poor, hungry, hurting or bullied for my faith.

Allow me to back up a bit and briefly set the scene. Jesus has just spent the night up on the mountain, praying before he chose his 12 disciples. As morning dawns, he and the newly called 12 descend the mountain to find a crowd waiting. People in need of help have come from everywhere, and Jesus *heals them all*. Here we find him standing 'on a level place' with the crowd, and he looks up at his 12 and describes what life in an upside-down kingdom looks like: those who are destitute, unfed, grieving, and marginalized can 'leap for joy,' while those who are wealthy, full-bellied, carefree, and well-liked should watch out, because their position is precarious, not as enviable as they might believe. Jesus warns that those material things they consider to be signs of God's favor are in fact liabilities that might do them spiritual harm.

I can't help but want to be Luke's copy editor here ... I am far more comfortable with Matthew's beatitudes which allow me more wiggle-room. "Blessed are the poor **in spirit** ... those who hunger and thirst **for righteousness** ..." Matthew's version is softer, more palatable, easier to digest. But no. No such luck here. Luke describes those who have nothing to fall back on in this world as being enviable, respectable, valuable, and those who have options (a Plan B) when things go sideways, as abiding in a spiritually precarious place.

And so I'm left wondering, are we to wallow in guilt or shame over how much easier our lives are than those of others'? Are we to avoid happiness and seek out suffering, romanticizing poverty and hardship?

It's interesting to note that Jesus prefaces this hard teaching by non-discriminately healing everyone gathered of their diseases and curing them of unclean spirits ~ tending to the needs of every person in the crowd in every possible way. "Clearly, he does not valorize misery for its own sake. As we see throughout the Scriptures, pain in and of itself is neither holy nor redemptive in the Christian [narrative]. Jesus' ministry is all about healing, abundance, liberation and joy."<sup>1</sup>

While he is speaking primarily to those whom he had just chosen as his disciples, there are many others within earshot: all those who join Jesus at this 'level place,' then and now, and he is speaking to each of us. At this level place, where no one is on ground higher than another, there is no insider or outsider, there is no recognition of any socially-constructed hierarchy, there is only belonging and equity and Truth ... Yes, Luke tells us that Jesus brought them down the mountain to this level place, to say these words about how things *really* work. But only after he, too, is standing on level ground, takes a breath, and 'looks up' at them.

Also, it's important for me to remember that as Jesus makes these pronouncements, he isn't holding some sort of sorting hat (you belong to the 'blessed' group and you belong to the 'cursed' one) ... all of us will find ourselves in each category at different times in our lives.

Part of 'how things *really* work' is that the journey of faith tends toward a movement from right relationship with God to self-initiated distance from God and back again over and over again throughout our lives. We invite blessing every time we find ourselves empty and yearning for the light of Christ, and we tread in risky territory every time we retreat into smug and thoughtless self-interest. Jesus reminds his listeners that when we are vulnerable and hurting and deemed 'less than' in the world's eyes, God blesses us with mercy and kindness. However, when we are 'full' of anything but God, we will discover spiritual impoverishment.

Without directly spelling it out, Jesus' list of beatitudes names some of the fundamental views of human identity: Am I what I have? Am I what I do? Am I what people say about me?<sup>2</sup> In Jesus' words, we hear various answers to these

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Debi Thomas

<sup>2</sup> Hat tip to Henri Nouwen

questions ~ I am what I do (weep or succeed); I am what I have (plenty or not enough); I am what people say/think about me (good or ill, truth or lies).

As I read Luke's beatitudes, I hear Jesus helping to give his followers something about their identity to hold on to when the tough times inevitably come. In spite of our poverty, hunger, grief, or rejection, we are valued, we are favored, we are worthy of love and care. There will be a 'great reversal' where those who are cast down will be brought up, those who are hungry will be filled, those who weep will laugh. Conversely, the woes (or warnings) are our red flags for those times when we focus on ourselves and turn a blind eye to the suffering that others are experiencing.

Because in the divine order, we are all on the same level ~ saint and sinner. In God's kingdom, there is no hierarchy ... just God's children caring for creation and one another.

These are gentle, yet powerful, truths that he shares with us. Jesus, our Holy Steamroller, comes among us, midway between the mountain and the valley, inviting us to a level place, and asks us to recognize a reality where we are all equals, where we can embrace our own belovedness and celebrate the belovedness of everyone else.

In a beautiful reflection on Jesus's kingdom, Frederick Buechner wrote the following nearly 50 years ago:

- "The world says, 'Mind your own business,' and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.'
- The world says, 'Follow the wisest course and be a success,' and Jesus says, 'Follow me and be crucified.'
- The world says, 'Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own' — and Jesus says, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'
- The world says, 'Law and order,' and Jesus says, 'Love.' The world says, 'Get' and Jesus says, 'Give.'"<sup>3</sup>

A friend of mine recently said, the faithful in every vocation and occupation "should realize that their duty should be to hear not the voices that are always heard but the cries that are never listened to; act not just for those who have access

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<sup>3</sup> *The Faces of Jesus: A Life Story*

but for those who need defenders; and run not after those who have wealth but the friendless who need a champion.”<sup>4</sup>

Back to the question of identity ~ by addressing the worldly questions ‘Am I what I have? Am I what I do? Am I what people say about me?,’ Jesus directs us to answer the bigger question of ‘Who am I?’ What the world says about us is not what God believes of us. We are free to hoard or to give, to fill up or to empty out; we are free to focus on ourselves or focus on others, to stray or to follow. But above all, our true identity, is that we are all *worthy ~ of love and compassion and mercy and healing and forgiveness*. This blessing of worthiness invites us to make our way back to God’s level place, to reorient our mindset of who is better-than or less-than, and to return again to right relationship with God and one another.

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Victor Urecki