

Saluted or Scorned

I want us to look at three questions this morning: What is Jesus asking of us in today's gospel? What makes it possible for us to live this way? And why would we want to live this way?

So what is Jesus talking about in today's gospel? The short answer is that Jesus is describing a set of values that he expects his followers to have, and they are radically counter-cultural values. Sometimes, the poetry and the familiar words of the Beatitudes, the statements starting with Blessed are...sort of lull us into an artificial and superficial comfort with the sayings, like the people listening to this sermon of Jesus' in the movie Monty Python's Life of Brian, who straining to hear from their position at the back of the crowd, end up leaving saying, "Oh, that's nice...blessed are the cheesemakers. They are such nice, hard working fellows."

That's one reason I like this version in Luke. Even if I did nod off at the beginning of the gospel, with the "blessed" statements, those woes are bound to wake me up in a hurry. Because it's true...I am one of the richest people in the world. My annual income puts me among the wealthiest 5% of people in the world. If you want to find out where you are on that scale, there's a website – globalrichlist.com – that will tell you, based on data from the World Bank Development division, so that "Woe to the Rich" in today's gospel is really going to come as a jolt.

And I think we need a jolt sometimes to get us out of the patterns we are stuck in and get us to a place where we can more fully experience God's blessing. I, for one, am grateful for Jesus' difficult sayings – for things like the woes in today's gospel – because sometimes, especially in a culture in which sound bites and enticements and warnings are flying at us constantly, we need something pretty shocking to get our attention.

Jesus isn't just trying to get us to drink a different brand of pop or ask our doctors about a new medication. He's trying to get those of us who are rich, full, and respected to change our whole orientation to life, to free us from entrenched patterns of relating to one another so that we can live into the kind of right relationship that's really going to be life giving, for us and for the world.

I think it helps a great deal in seeking to understand what Jesus is saying here if we clarify the meaning of three key words in this passage. There was a reason seminary made me take two years of biblical greek, I guess.

The first word is makaros, which the New Revised Standard version of the Bible translates as "blessed" which doesn't quite convey the sense of the word. Some translations say "happy" which is even worse. This isn't about an internal emotional state, and it's not nearly as abstract or religious as the word "blessed" sounds. Makaros is more like "honored"; as a statement of community values, it's like saying "we salute". And ouai, which the NRSV translates here as "woe" is more like "shameless" or "we scorn."

Let's think about that in terms of our own culture. Advertising is an excellent indicator of what we value as a culture, what we think we want. And what does advertising tell us we value or

scorn? Think of a few ads you've seen recently – what do they tell you we strive for or strive to avoid?

So this week, I paid a lot of attention to what I saw around me, what was on television or in magazines, and here are some of the Beatitudes and woes, the “we salutes” and “we scorns” that I saw:

We salute the pure of breath, clear of skin and white of tooth, for they will have dates on Valentine's Day.

We salute the consumers; the diamonds they give are forever.

We salute those low in body fat; their six pack abs will win them love.

We salute those with high credit limits and a willingness to use them; what they have is priceless.

We salute the rich, for they are our major donors.

We salute the achievers, for we hope we'll become what we envy.

We salute the winners for they can reward our loyalty.

We salute the strong, for they can determine their own destiny.

We scorn the poor, for they can't provide for their families.

We scorn the hungry, for we fear they will disrupt our lunch to beg.

We scorn those who weep, for they remind us of vulnerabilities we try to deny or hide.

We scorn those the world scorns, for this demonstrates that we, unlike they, are insiders.

That's not Jesus' vision of the world. That's not what Jesus salutes. And when we're seeking to follow Jesus, we're probably not going to win a lot of respectability points in our culture. We might even find ourselves in the position of the person Jesus praises in the last Beatitude: “We salute you, we honor you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on Jesus' account.

That last Beatitude from Jesus makes very clear what the consequences can be in really living up to Jesus' vision of what God's people salute or scorn.

Scholars point out that this whole passage points to a situation a lot of early Christians found themselves in. They lived in a culture that said “You've got to get married, you've got to be fruitful and multiply if you're going to be a good person.”

Actually, our culture says pretty much the same thing. Would we elect a bachelor president? First century culture said that even after you get married, you're supposed to stay in your village and take care of your parents until they die, and then to see that they get a proper burial.

So in that first century culture, if you heard Jesus' call – the call we heard Peter receive in last week's gospel – to drop everything, leave your village and your parents and follow Jesus – you would probably find yourself shut off. Honoring father and mother, caring for them for as long as they lived, was one of the highest “family values” in Jewish and Roman cultures. Leave your

parents behind to follow Jesus, as Peter did and anybody who knew who you were wouldn't do business with you, wouldn't house you, wouldn't employ you. You could end up with absolutely nothing – no honor, no money, no home and no power to get back into the system you left behind.

That's exactly the kind of situation envisioned in the Beatitudes. There are two Greek words for "poor" and the one in today's gospel is NOT the one used to refer to peasants, who had to work incredibly hard to put food on the table, and sometimes had to go without – but the one used to refer to those who are completely destitute, without family, scorned by all.

These are people disowned by their families because of their way of life – their following Jesus – was counter-cultural beyond what their families could accept without risking that kind of ostracism for the whole family instead of just for the black sheep. So these destitute people drift from place to place scavenging, homeless and friendless.

Well, friendless, except for one thing: Jesus befriends them. And homeless except for one thing: Jesus calls us as a community to be home for those scorned and counted worthless by the world. That's a hard thing, especially for those of us who have a lot, - a lot of wealth, a lot of power, a lot of respect. We have the most to lose by casting our lot with those who have none of these things. We could lose it all, like Peter, who left his boat, his family, his home and everything he had to follow Jesus.

What makes that possible? What gives someone the strength to do that? For Peter, and I suspect for most of those who have found the capacity for that kind of radical discipleship, that strength comes out of an experience of God's overwhelming abundance.

You might remember from last week's gospel that in Peter's case, it was an abundant catch of fish – so abundant that it threatened to sink the boat. If Peter hadn't had partners to call to help take in the catch, he would have been a goner. In that moment, the urgent question in Peter's life shifted from "Will there be enough fish? How will God provide?" to "Will there be enough people gathered to take in God's abundance?" From then on, instead of trying to gather enough fish, Peter will be trying to gather enough people.

Have we had that kind of experience with God? Are we confident that God will provide for us abundantly, in our material needs, in honor, in love – if we give our money and our honor and our love as freely as God does? I think we, as a community had some experience of that – of feeling so blessed with God's abundance that we can forget ourselves and our sense that only the very best people deserve to experience the best we have to offer. We can give freely.

And when we really connect deeply with others in need, something similar happens. We remember that all of us here are on the Global Rich List in more ways than one, and we find ways to dig deep, to look beyond anything that would tell us that resources are scarce and we can't afford to look much further than our own household.

Think about all the good works you have done with the Casa Materna in Nicaragua, with giving scholarships to Camp Beloved for LGBTQIA youth, with keeping the Rranxburgaj family in Sanctuary and now the Mayele family is living with us while they seek asylum from Cameroon. Whenever a need is shared of monetary or other donations, Central always steps up in major ways. We share our space with mission teams and don't charge them because we want them to come experience Detroit.

We open our doors to organizers so they can meet and plan actions for justice. We feed the unhoused four days a week and provide space for other agencies doing the work of justice and peace.

We find the strength to give as God gives as we experience the fullness of God's love for us. Giving honor to the poor, the weak, those despised by respectable people in the world brings light and God's healing touch. It pulls us out of the vicious cycles that we participate in, where the rich stay healthy and the sick stay poor, where we give more power to the powerful and scorn those already pushed to the margins, and gets us into God's cycle of blessing, in which giving more deeply helps us discover God's abundance more deeply. That's grace, my friends. That is grace! Thanks be to God.