

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God—
but woe to you who are rich and full and laughing now
for you will be hungry and mourn and weep.”

“I don’t believe that,” you might say. . .

“and I don’t accept the point of Jesus’ words either—
that people can’t be rich and happy.”

And maybe you are right. . .but consider this:

With just around 5% of the world’s population,
we, in North America, currently consume more than 25%
of the world’s food and energy resources.

Now, if, as a result of our consumption--if we were profoundly happy,
I suppose it could be argued or defended by some
that it is worth it to the world to pay such a price.

But we aren’t happy people.

An average of 40% of teens struggle with some sort of eating disorder
and suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers;
legal and illegal drug and alcohol use is rampant. . .
and not only among young people
trying to find some sense of belonging and contentment,
but also, and more worrisome, among the middle-aged
and senior people looking for relief
from their physical aches and pains or, worse,
relief from their feelings of loneliness, uselessness or irrelevance.

Almost half of marriages end in divorce—

and not just among celebrities and the rich and famous either
but among ordinary, everyday people. . .like us.

Taking one’s own life is the 10th leading cause of death among adults
and as I mentioned earlier, ranks in second place when it comes to teenagers.

Those and a multitude of other sad, and shocking statistics
that all of us have read or heard about can’t help but lead us
to ask this question of ourselves and of our society at large:

“What do we have to own or to be or to do
in order to find a sense of peace, contentment and happiness now
and to have hope for a brighter and more fulfilling future?”

It isn't difficult to recognize and admit
that our affluence and consumption has brought
a great deal of loneliness and emptiness along with it.

In fact, I suspect that many of the people we know,
are hurting and wounded and broken in some way. . .
and almost all of us, to one degree or another, have felt or feel
estranged or alienated either from God, or a family member or two,
from our neighbours. . .or ourselves—and no amount
of money or medication, emotional or financial manipulation
can put us back together again or make us feel whole once more.

Now, that doesn't mean that we can't be rich. . .
but maybe it means that we need to redefine the term “rich”:
Changing its emphasis from having boat-loads of money—
which, I suspect, few of us have these days--
to having fewer needs--which, I suspect,
most of us could achieve without too much effort.

I remember reading that it was said of Mother Theresa
that she only “owned” one change of clothing and a pail--
the pail used to wash the clothing she had just worn.
Pretty hard not to describe her accurately as “rich”
because it was impossible for her to be bribed or threatened.

“If you don't do what I want, I will take your pail away.”
Really? That's a threat? “And if you do whatever I ask,
I will give you another change of clothes.”
Not much of a reward there, eh?
I mean, she had everything she needed and wanted—
and that, as we all know, is truly being “rich”.

And, of course, a potential side benefit of lowered expectations for us
might mean--if politicians and citizens were to agree to it—
might mean a possible rise in the standard of living
for many others who have been left out or squeezed out.

“Live simply” said Gandhi, “so that others may simply live.”

Anyway, I put this notion before you today in the spirit
of this morning’s Second Lesson and the Gospel reading
which tell us that in the act of “dying” to ourselves—
that is, in the decisions we make and actions we take
in putting some of our needs to death. . .
or having some of them taken from us,
leaving us grieving their loss and our losses--

that in that act of dying, we and others
will discover and experience resurrection—
resurrection to a new way of thinking and living
that is “poor in things” and “rich in God”. . .
“poor in needs and wants” but “rich in happiness and blessedness.”

Some years ago, I ended up playing a round of golf in Phoenix
with an African-American man from Memphis, Tennessee.
And one of the conversations we had was around his comment
that it is “hard to know what life is like
for those below us on the economic ladder.”

“Hard to know what life is like for those below us on the economic ladder.”

Now, if that makes sense to you, then let me ask you a question
about your condition in life. . .your place or rung on the ladder:
Are you financially secure. . .or relatively secure. . .
with either an abundance of material possessions
or at least more than enough. . .more than you need?

Do we get to eat out often--or at least used to be able to
before restaurants or pubs were closed down or slimmed down?
How about a comfortable place to live? Do you enjoy life. . .
with the occasional trip to Mexico, Maui, New York or Phoenix
or even just Calgary or Toronto. . .or Coquitlam?
Well-thought of by your friends?
Retired but still able to look forward to something good?

If answer is “yes” to any of those questions or situations,
then consider others in our community and our world.

Are any of them poor, hungry, grieving, excluded,
 under suspicion, hated? Is the answer to the prayer for daily bread
 pretty much always a corn tortilla with refried beans. . .
 or a bowl of rice mixed with a few veggies or bits of meat or fish
 or a handful of yams and some bites of fried bread?
 Of course, the answer is “yes”. . .and we consider them
 extremely unfortunate. Happy are we. . .unhappy are they.

I mean, that’s the common-sense view of life--
 so why does Jesus go against popular wisdom
 by looking at those we pity and telling them:
 “Are you ever lucky! How blessed are you
 to have such poverty, hunger, grief and misery in your lives.
 You must be very happy!”

And then, even more astonishingly, looking at people like us—
 people who seem to have it made—Jesus tells us “Woe to you!
 Or, as a brave preacher once put it: “Damn you!
 Damn you who are rich, full, laughing, on top of the world.
 Watch out! Watch out! Because your blessedness and good fortune,
 your happiness and comfort is a great danger. . .even a possible curse!”

But how can this be, we ask, befuddled and bewildered?
 What’s going on here? Doesn’t Jesus have it all upside-down?
 If we have to be poor, hungry, grieving, hated, marginalized
 in order to be happy, how are we supposed to become those things?
 And who in their right mind would want to? Is being hated a possible value?
 Does he mean that having few or no resources at our disposal
 will improve our lot and our lives?

Look! Make no mistake here. Jesus isn’t glamourizing poverty and suffering
 and he’s not calling us to go slumming
 or make ourselves weak or sick or despised.
 He knows poverty can lead to despair and depression,
 to crime and violence, to sadness and feeling of futility. . .
 and so he’s not trying to get us to think of disabilities and misfortunes
 as magical cures for what ails us.

Instead, he adds “woes” to his “blessings” because he knows
 that most people like us have a hard time
 imagining how being poor can help someone feel blessed--
 and so he focuses on the very things that most of us
 work. . .or worked for. . .and hope and pray for. . .
 and then lists them as woeful and miserable in order to get our attention.

He knows that being well-fed, happy and well-thought of
 is what we really seek. . .even crave.

 He knows that consuming and accumulating possessions,
 having enough insurance or retirement funds
 leads us to imagine ourselves as safe and secure
 and in control of our lives and the things of life. . .
 that it leads us to believe, consciously or unconsciously,
 that we can work our way into happiness or buy our way into joy. . .

because. . .because we think we are powerful and independent enough
 to provide everything we could ever need. . .
 that we have all the resources we require to run our own lives. . .
 and, he says, we are therefore in danger of forgetting
 that we need a Saviour. . .a deliverer and rescuer,
 a liberator and healer, a comforter and companion.

How blessed, enviable, and happy are those who understand their need for God
 to supply their physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

 The poor, the hungry, the grieving—the little, last, least and lost--
 they have nothing and no one other than God to rely on,
 nowhere else to go but to God. . .no one else besides God
 to strengthen, sustain, console and stay with them
 through whatever comes. . .to stand alongside them
 all the way through whatever happens.

And they know God because they need God. . .and they know they need God. . .
 and because of knowing that need, Jesus says, they are blessed. . .
 and we are and will be blessed by them and by God
 if we listen to them and let them tell us and teach us
 about what it means to be helpless enough
 and blessed enough to need God.

Because, honestly and actually, it is really only helplessness
 that brings us to God to stand before God just as we are. . .
 and not as we imagine ourselves to be. . .
 or even as others see us or think us to be.

Let me close with a story about “Esther”.

Now, that’s not her real name but it is one I am using today.
 Esther was a single mother with four children—a widow--
 who came to Canada as a refugee from Tanzania
 where she had fled to from the war and massacre in Rwanda in 1988.

She was poor, uneducated and worn out from her dozen years
 of living under the constant threat of sexual assault
 and was overjoyed to be safe in Canada. . .
 to know that her children were safe as well.

Perhaps I will share more about her story another time,
 but this morning what I want to tell you is one small piece of that story.
 It was All Saints’ Sunday, about 6 or 8 months after she arrived,
 and our practice was, on All Saints, to take time
 to light candles and read a list of saints—
 from the past or present, including those in our congregation
 who had died in the previous year; and then everyone present
 would have the opportunity to speak aloud the names
 of family members or friends who had died.

It was always quite an emotional service
 listening to the murmurs of names spoken through tears
 prompted by our mourning and grieving those we loved and cherished.

Just prior to the service, Esther came to me with a sheet of paper
 and on it she had printed names of those she wanted me to read
 because, as she said, “I cannot say their names
 without crying too much.”
 I said I would be pleased to read them for her
 and tucked the sheet of paper into the binder I used.

When the time came for this Rite of Remembrance, we lit the candles,
 turned off the lights, and I read the list of the saints names
 printed in the bulletin. . .and then, after a period of silence,

people began to speak the names of their loved ones. . .
and I turned the page to find the sheet given me by Esther.

On it were printed five names. . .and I could scarcely get through reading them—
and not because African names are sometimes quite difficult
to pronounce. . .or because everyone in a family
often has a different last name. . .but because
Esther had printed the date of death for each of those five names--
and all of them. . .all of them had died. . .were killed. . .on the same day.
Five family members lost in one day. “Save us from the time of trial.”

After worship was over and everyone was downstairs for coffee,
I went to Esther and asked her this question:
“Why are you here today. . .in this church?
Didn’t you feel as though Jesus had abandoned your family
or forgotten you or refused to help you?
At first she looked confused about what I was asking.
And then, with tears in her eyes, said
“Pastor, you don’t understand. I have no one else but Jesus.”

And there I stood—a supposedly well-educated pastor and theologian
with decades of experience in dealing with grief and loss—
there I stood—a man who spoke so easily every week
of our need to have faith and trust in the love of God
and in the presence of Jesus with us at all times. . .
and I knew, without a doubt, that my faith set next to hers
was merely a bit of kindling compared to the fire of her faith and depth of her trust.

“I have no one else but Jesus. I no one else but Jesus.”
Was she naive, childishly desperate to believe anything. . .
or did she know something I didn’t, or, more truthfully, **someone** I didn’t?

Blest are they know God and know their need of God. . .
and blest are we for those times when we get to listen to someone
who does know. . .and can teach us about what it means
to be poor enough, hungry enough, grieving enough,
helpless enough and grateful enough to trust that God is with us,
and that Jesus is always beside us. . .and will never leave us
no matter what. . .no matter what. Amen. SDG