

Seeing As Jesus Sees

St. Peter's, Glenside

February 13, 2022

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This is one of those Sundays when we have to stare awkwardly at a huge disconnect: between the gospel Jesus is preaching, and the gospel we all prefer to believe in.

After ministering to the multitudes and healing everyone who flocked to him, Jesus speaks to the crowd. He looks at his disciples—not the Twelve, but hundreds of his followers—and he says, “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.”

In the world of Jesus' day “the poor” are pretty much everybody, the people of Israel. They're poor in so many ways—exploited, discouraged at their plight under Roman occupation and rule, overtaxed, hopeless. To these people Jesus promises a reversal. It's all going to be flipped when the reign of God is ushered in.

Then it will be just like Mary sang it in her Magnificat, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

If things are going to flip, then the people on top had better take note. “But woe to you who are rich now, 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.”

The poor aren't “blessed”—meaning “happy” or “fortunate”—because they have some inner Zen-like serenity that makes their poverty not so grinding and degrading. No—they are “blessed” because despite their present suffering, their state is about to be reversed, flipped.

And in Jesus' eyes that reversal has already happened. “The kingdom of God is among you,” he says. The poor are blessed right now! It's already here...if you can see it, and acknowledge it. *If it doesn't cost you too much to see it.*

You know, there's a reason we don't see or acknowledge the gospel truth Jesus holds out for us—it's because we have an investment in NOT seeing it.

What if we believed Jesus? We'd have to admit, most of us, that those woes have our name on them. I don't mean that we're all going to go home and have a glass of Dom Perignon while we watch the Super Bowl in our private home theatre. When 46% of the world's population—almost half of humanity—lives on less than \$5.50 a day, most of us are really rich.

Using that metric, how can rich Christians hear Jesus' words today? At ECS we seek every day to alleviate that grinding, de-humanizing poverty, and I wish I could say, “The way to respond to Jesus' words today is to join our work—give, volunteer, advocate with us!” And St. Peter's does that in so many wonderful ways with ECS! But that's not how it works. Jesus' words aren't prescriptive—they're not telling us what to do.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, the sermon “is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work.” Jesus isn't saying, “Go help the poor”—even though he's committed his whole life to that work. He just says, Here's how it is—the poor are the apple of God's eye. That's just the plain truth—but only if you can see it. So what we need this morning is a conversion of our minds and a healing of our eyes, so that the scales fall and we see what Jesus sees.

The real Gospel is always about a shift in consciousness—not a change in behavior, so that we're moral and upright and righteous and perfect. That's the gospel *we* create because it's

too frightening to take Jesus at his word. Jesus' good news of the Kingdom is about seeing with new eyes. And once we see as Jesus sees, we'll just naturally do what he does.

In the end, this "Kingdom" business is crazy—makes no human sense. Any attempt to explain it always falls short. Frederick Buechner says it so well. "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.' In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion."

As I read this text about the poor, I was reminded of a line from Wendell Berry's great poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." Berry gets at the upside-down-ness of the kingdom, and the way to the poverty that Jesus says is blessed: "Take all that you have and be poor."

And since that whole poem packs such a gospel wallop, and because it's a snowy Sunday morning I thought we'd just read the poem. So—savor this.

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

by Wendell Berry

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest

that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion — put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?
Go with your love to the fields.
Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.