

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Gospel passage for today surely sounds vaguely familiar. It's a passage that parallels the place in Matthew's gospel where Jesus preaches the sermon on the mount, beginning with the famous beatitudes "Blessed are the poor in spirit," etc.

Luke's version of the beatitudes has a bit more of an edge to it, though, because for every beatitude there is a corresponding admonition. "Blessed are you who are poor" is paired with "Woe to you who are rich."

Where Matthew's version focuses on the difference between what counts for blessedness in this world and what counts for blessedness in the kingdom of God, Luke wants us to remember that membership in the kingdom requires an active turning away from the values of the world.

That can be hard to do. Even for a person like me who has made a public vow to live in poverty, I know that, by virtue of my membership in a religious order, I'm probably never going to experience poverty on the level of many of my neighbors. Sharing economic resources, as the friars do, insulates us from the worst of what can happen.

So, we friars have to take seriously the possibility that the words of this gospel might be more an admonition

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than a word of blessing. What are we doing with what we have been given? is a question that occupies our thinking and planning in an ongoing basis.

Really, the first beatitude that undoubtedly applies to us, and to everyone, I think, is the one “Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh.” We all have known moments when we have been moved by grief or compassion in the face of suffering. That is something that is open to everyone, regardless of their economic situation.

It may begin with the experience of accompanying a friend who struggles through a terminal illness or incurable medical condition, but can also be triggered simply by seeing the misery of people who have been visited by a natural disaster or war or simply have so much less than we do.

In those moments we are confronted by the fact that things are not the way they need to be if people are going to make it through life without falling apart in some way or another. Presented with the misery of others can moved us to ask the same question that the followers of John the Baptist asked, “What can we do?”

In fact, for people living in the relative comfort of the

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United States, the feeling of compassion may be our most available entry point into the reality of the kingdom of God. We may have already worked out things so that the possibility of abject poverty is fairly remote. That's not what we will be inclined to cry out to God about.

But concern for the poor and hungry is always a way that can take us forward into a deeper sharing with what moves God and what his kingdom is about in this world.

It is a worthwhile consideration to start from the idea that ours are the only hands that God can use to make a difference. The saying "Pray like everything depends on God and act like everything depends on us" can spur us into action for the sake of others and move us to make a difference.

The good thing about all that is that we can start anywhere. The needs are all around us.

In some cases responding to those needs, if it is going to be effective in the long run, will come up against the structures in society that keep things broken. Jesus includes in his beatitudes, both in Luke's version and in Matthew, the one about confronting opposition and injustice.

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Those who are receiving their reward in this world are not always inclined to give it up, even if it does come at the cost of others. Maybe that beatitude comes last because it is the culmination of the others: If we allow compassion to hold sway in our thinking and our acting, we find that the kingdom is most present when we move from simple compassion to a deep experience of the presence of God in the midst of our struggles for creating true peace and justice.

Jesus is the one who is pointing out where blessedness lies in this world, but as Luke would tell it, we have to choose to embrace it, to claim it by the work we do on behalf of those who go without.

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1. Similar sounding to Mt.'s beatitudes: Blessedness found in unlikely places.
2. Luke includes an edge, either/or reality. Intentional decision required to turn away from the world's values.
3. Can be hard to do, even with a vow of poverty; the common life provides a safety net. Take the admonition seriously.
4. Gospel as admonition raises the question: "What are we doing with what we have been given?"
5. The most accessible beatitude: "Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh." Everyone knows about weeping.

Examples: accompanying the sick and dying; simply witnessing the misery of others.

6. That can move us to compassion, action, and ask "What can we do?"
7. Compassion may be our most available starting point into the reality of the kingdom.
8. Concern for those who suffer can always take us forward.
9. A helpful reflection: What if we're the only hands God's

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got?

10. The good news: We can start anywhere. Needs are not hard to find.

11. Be ready for opposition, broken things that want to stay broken.

12. Some are benefitting from the status quo, won't want to give it up.

13. The last beatitude is the culmination of the others—where they all are heading.

14. We have to embrace the life of blessedness, to claim it by the work we do on behalf of those who go without.