

“Emptying Out for God”
Epiphany 6 – Year C – Feb. 13, 2022

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I’m always delighted when a new perspective on a familiar scripture brings it to life in a new way. That happened a couple of weeks ago when Jerry Howe emphasized the word “today” in the story of Jesus telling his home crowd Isaiah’s words had been fulfilled in their hearing them from him. What I’d always taken pretty much as a holy pronouncement became a call. The story went from being primarily historical to an unfolding reality meant to be at work in our lives today.

Much that same kind of fresh insight took shape as I did some reading on today’s Gospel. I’ve always heard the Sermon on the Plain, with its blessings and woes, as Jesus telling his disciples that his heart – and God’s – is with those who suffer. Which is definitely true – as far as it goes. But I don’t believe God’s special attention to the poor reflects God’s greater love for the poor. It’s simply that God doesn’t want anyone to suffer.

This makes the “woes” Jesus invokes a little harder to understand. They almost sound like a threat – “just you wait!” But, in fact, I think that dualistic reading -- of blessings for some people and woes for others -- misses the much more dynamic point Jesus is trying to make.

Let’s look at the setting. Jesus is something of a rock star at this point. After his, shall we say, rocky start and rather miraculous escape in Nazareth, he’s been dazzling people with his teaching and healings. He’s even gotten a bunch of guys to abandon their livelihoods and leave their loved ones to follow him on the road. Jesus is definitely on fire with the Holy Spirit and his mission is off to an impressive start.

Jesus spends the night before today’s scene up on a mountain in prayer and at daybreak chooses twelve of his disciples to be his apostles. The twelve would no longer just be his followers – his students – they would now also be his representatives. They would go out ahead of him on their own, albeit in pairs, to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God. Now there’s a job for a group of ordinary guys -- talk about a leap of faith! Which is exactly what Jesus is going to ask of them over and over again.

When Jesus comes down the mountain, crowds have gathered from near and far. They’ve come to listen to him, to be healed by him, and just to touch into the spiritual power that emanates from him. And for a time, he obliges. Then Jesus gets decidedly down to earth and, servant-leader that he is, looks up to his disciples to communicate his blessings and woes.

Now we know from the reading we heard from Jeremiah, that begins “Thus says the Lord,” that the Hebrew people, like most ancients, believed God cursed them or blessed them according to whether they put their trust in Yahweh or in merely human endeavors. The implication of this belief, of course, is that if you’re doing well, it’s a sign God loves and blesses you and if you’re not, it means you’re decidedly out of God’s favor. Sadly, this so-called prosperity gospel, which isn’t good news at all, is still taught today.

On first hearing, we might think Jesus is reinforcing the belief that God separates people into the worthy and unworthy. And is only inverting *who it is* God sends blessings or woes upon. But, in fact, I think Jesus is telling his disciples pretty much the opposite of that. I think he's trying to free them from an understanding of God that keeps people looking over their shoulders to make sure God isn't about to punish them. Or even reward them. He wants to introduce them to the one true God whose love is constant, and always just and merciful.

Jesus knew his disciples, and especially his apostles, were taking a pretty big risk to throw their lots in with him. As much as he wants people to follow him, he also wants them to know what they're in for if they do. So he tells them – and us – about the realities of the journey he proposes we join him on. A real-world journey that will have real-world woes as well as blessings. Woes not inflicted by God, but that are natural consequences of being a fallible human being involved in human relationships and systems. *Natural* consequences, like a tree that grows or withers depending on its environment.

We all have times of success and of failure in life, which sometimes lead to material riches or poverty, and other times just to the associated inner states, which are also quite real. Everyone has times of mourning and times of laughter. Times when we hunger and times when we feel deliciously full. And, face it, we all like to be spoken well of. That is to say – we're all human. Which means we're all vulnerable.

Even though his actual cross is not yet on the horizon, Jesus has already had some experience with the dark side of life. You'll remember that after his anointing by God at his baptism, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness so he could learn to grapple with the not-so-holy spirits that bedevil our world.

And he knew his followers would encounter them too. He knew they would be beguiled by worldly successes of one sort or another, now and again, as well as the admiration that comes with them. And he knew they'd suffer hardships, sometimes to the point of wanting to give up. Most importantly, he knew that to the extent they attached themselves to transient, circumstantial goods, or fell into despair, they would stumble blindly away from entering into the fullness of life in God. So Jesus enlightens them – and all of us – about how human life really works beneath the surface. He shows us exactly where we're most likely -- even if most unexpectedly -- to find God in life's ups and downs.

Jesus is not making a holy pronouncement that sets up a static dichotomy between worthy people who are poor, hungry, sad, and reviled, and unworthy people who are rich, satisfied, happy, and esteemed. He's not playing favorites with some or threatening anybody. In fact, his "woe to you" language is much more like "you are to be pitied" than "you will be cursed."

Jesus is, as always, both calling us and showing us The Way – the vibrant and sometimes challenging way of walking through life in right relationship with God and one another. And our true selves. It's a pathway anyone can follow and everyone is invited to take. A holy journey that leads to a depth of peace and well-being – an abundance of life – we can scarcely imagine.

There's an exercise commonly offered during spiritual retreats. People are invited to make a timeline of the major highs and lows they've experienced in life. Then they're invited to add in the times when they were most aware of God's presence with them. And lo and behold, most people report feeling closest to God during their times of suffering.

When you think about it, this makes some sense. I might give God a nod of thanks, maybe even some conversation time, when things are going well. But I'm also likely pretty wrapped up in whatever I'm achieving or enjoying. It's not that God is absent during the good times, it's that my attention and energy, even my hope and trust are overly invested in the things of mere mortals.

Conversely, it's often when my worldly dreams are shattered that I really feel the need for God. It's in hard times that I'm most likely to sense my utter dependence on God, my desire to be healed by God, or just my longing for God's comforting presence. It's when I'm feeling like a big nothing that I realize the *real* me actually *exists* only in God. So, paradoxically, it's in these desert times when I'm most likely to experience what it means to grow in God's grace – like a tree planted by water.

The journey through life's poverty and want, mourning and loneliness is decidedly not fun. But it's absolutely inevitable in our broken world and a crucial part of our being born into full union with God and one another. Jesus describes this process as losing our lives to find them or as taking up our crosses.

And yes, life will bring all of us our very own crosses, in the plural. Some of them will be fairly inconsequential; others will take us to our knees or even lay us flat out on the ground. But if we will take those crosses up and allow the dying to self that comes with them, we will discover they are the cross-shaped entryway to our resurrection in the Kingdom of God. Resurrection on this earth as well as in the great beyond.

There's even a fancy theological word from the Greek for this self-emptying we're called to – kenosis. And wouldn't you know it, Stephanie Spellers devotes a whole chapter to the personal and social dimensions of dying to self – and refusing to – in her book "The Church Cracked Open," which some of us are reading.

In today's gospel, and throughout the gospels, Jesus teaches us the deepest truths of life – of the fullness of eternal life lived in God and of the transient mirage of life lived apart from God. He warns any who would follow him about the challenges we'll all encounter, if only we have ears to hear. He also reassures us we're all on this journey together. And that all are equal and equally beloved in the sight of God.

Walking with Jesus is not for the faint of heart. Often, it's for the poor and the hungry, the sorrowful and the lonely. And God is always with us, leading us into the fullness of life.

Amen and thanks be to God!