

Not Being Had By What We Have

Just this morning one of my on-line news services released a story that likely you have not seen. It is stunning in its scope and implication. Further, it is stunning because no one saw this coming. I'll read it to you:

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Late yesterday, in a dramatic reversal of every public stance he has taken so far, and in a move that has jarred both conservatives and liberals alike, Pope Francis announced a historic reversal of the church's nearly 2000-year-old pro-poor stance. The Pope announced that, starting immediately, it is permanently rescinding the traditional "blessed" status of the world's poor and meek. Pope Francis in this surprising statement said, "Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ once said, 'Blessed are the and poor and the meek.' However, there has always been a tacit understanding between the Church and the poor and meek that this 'blessed' status was conditional upon their inheritance of the earth, an event which seems unlikely to happen anytime in the foreseeable future. Our relationship, therefore, must be terminated." Citing "two millennia of inaction and non achievement" by the world's impoverished and downtrodden, the Pope contended that the poor's historic inability to improve their worldly status constituted "bad faith" on their part.

"Twenty centuries should have been more than enough time for them to inherit the earth," the Supreme Pontiff said. "For years, the Catholic Church has made every effort to help them, but at some point, enough is enough. We are patient but we are not saints."

Other high church officials offered interpretations of the Pope's surprising decision. One Cardinal said, "Everything about the poor, from their simple dress to their quiet demeanors to their utter lack of can-do spirit, goes against Church philosophy. Sitting back and expecting the Lord to provide is not the type of behavior for which the Church should be rewarding its followers."

The news release continues: "In an effort to move away from its traditional poor core demographic and attract more upscale worshipers, Vatican officials announced

a number of changes for the Gospels. Among them: Christ shall be said to have been born in a rustic-but-spacious health care center and not a manger, with the amount of gold and frankincense bestowed upon Him by the white wise men quadrupled and the amount of myrrh halved. From now on it shall be as easy for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven as it is for a camel to pass through a heated three-car garage; and the episode between Christ and the moneylenders in the temple shall from now on be interpreted as a heated argument over appropriately aggressive fund-raising tactics.”

The Pope concluded his remarks by saying “Screw the poor.”

(I have drastically adapted this from a satirical publication called “The Onion.” It appeared in the June 18, 1998 issue.)

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You know, of course, that didn’t happen. However, I think a case could be made for saying that much of the preaching that has taken place in Christian churches since Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire has been to tell people that it is okay not to take the teachings of Jesus, especially those found in what is called “The Sermon On The Mount,” seriously.

I am basing the teachings I offer in here on the teachings of Jesus. Here is the Jesus teaching we are going to expose ourselves to today:

* * *

Yeshua says,

You poor are blessed
For the realm of heaven
Is already yours.

Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it:

You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all.

God's kingdom is there for the finding.

You poor are blessed
for the realm of heaven
is already yours.

* * *

You know what this means?

We're screwed!

Because, there is not a person in this room who qualifies for being poor.

You know how there are some things that happen in your life that stand out with crystal clarity? One of mine is from more than thirty years ago when I was in a bookstore here in Houston and just happened to pick up a copy of a book titled, "Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World."

For years I recommended, and still do, this book to my counseling clients. I actually suggest that people read it three times. Once in order to pay attention to the way they talk to themselves. Once again to pay attention to the way they talk to their children. And, once again, to pay attention to the way they talk to everyone else.

What made me buy the book, however, was a statistic I read in the very front of the book. It said something like this: If you have a place to sleep tonight, more than one pair of shoes, know what you are going to eat tomorrow night, have access to you own mode of transportation and a community of support; you have more than 90% of the world's population at the present moment.

I couldn't believe that. I thought: There may be street people around us and pockets of poverty but, give me a break, ninety percent of the world's population doesn't have that? I did the research, as best I could. There was no internet or Google access. Now there is. The statistics have only gotten worse.

If you are able to be here today or read or hear these words of mine later via the internet or via the iTunes podcast that means you are living lives materially more abundant than most people a generation ago and certainly more abundant than most people on the planet. There are three billion people on this planet who live on less than two dollars a day and one billion of these have no access to clean drinking water. I say this not to make us feel guilty but because . . . Well, we'll get to that before we are done here.

Here is something odd. Though the gross national product - an indicator of all our blessings and abundance - has steadily climbed upward during the past several decades none of it appears to have made us happier.

I remember, and I've shared this in here before, the time we were in Assisi, home of St. Francis. We wanted to go into the basilica but the crowds were so intense we kept putting it off. We didn't know it at the time but the reason for all the people being there was that we were there on the weekend of All Saint's Day, our Halloween. We finally made our way into the huge cathedral. One, wasn't enough so they had build two side-by-side. The place was packed. There was a high-noon mass about to begin. There was a choir in residence singing. The artwork and stained glass and religious icons and objects were overwhelming. The service was stunning.

I've always been, since I was a small child and knew absolutely nothing about it, moved by Gothic architecture and Gregorian music (Yes, strange for a Southern Baptist born in Tennessee but true!)

We followed the service as best we could. It was very moving. No doubt about that.

Then it hit me like the proverbial "ton of bricks," what would Francis, prophet and preacher of poverty think about this?

What indeed?!?!

This country right now is in a turmoil because people who do not have. People who feel people at the top have taken advantage of them, are angry. If you go and tell them that Jesus said, “You are blessed,” you are likely to get attacked.

I doubt, I could be wrong, that very many people in this room know people, on an intimate basis, who are poor.

So what is the relevance of this teaching for us?

Let’s start with the text.

This teaching of Jesus is found not only in the Gospel of Thomas which we are using for a guide but also in Matthew and Luke. Indeed, Matthew has Jesus preaching a sermon, which we have come to call “The Sermon on the Mount.” Perhaps the most famous image of this is a painting by Carl Bloch. I’m sure you’ve likely seen it. Or, something very like it. If is the painting used for the “cartoon” that has the caption, “Okay everyone, now listen carefully. I don’t want to end up with four different versions of this.”

I ask you, is this any way to begin a sermon?

“You are on the right track if you are poor.” Matthew add, “poor in spirit.” To which we all give a huge sigh of relief.

“If you want to be a follower mine, be one of mine, claim that you are in my group; what is required is that you have to give up everything.” No organization in the United States, except the Federal Government, has more stuff than religious institutions.

One translation has it, “Woe to you rich! It’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have it all you’ll ever get.”

This teaching of Jesus is extremely difficulty for those of us who are interested in seeing how the teachings of Jesus can be relevant to our lives to deal with.

The Jesus scholars are in total agreement that if you are looking for an authentic saying of Jesus, this would be at the very top of the list.

If you want an accessible commentary on the Gospel of Thomas, as well as the other canonical gospels, I HIGHLY RECOMMEND the book, “The Five Gospels, What Did Jesus Really Say: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus.”

Every passage or teaching not only has a commentary with it but also is color coded.

The color codes mean:

Red: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.

Pink: Jesus probably said something like this.

Gray: Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own.

Black: Jesus did not say this: it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition.

An easy way to remember what the codes mean is: That’s Jesus! Sounds like Jesus. Well, maybe. There’s been some mistake.

Some of the passages people love the most and seem to use the most to “prove” their doctrinal stance is the correct one, fall into the “black” or “there’s been some mistake” category. This one, “blessed are the poor,” is as red as it can get. It is red in Thomas, red in Luke and pink in Matthew - that’s where the “poor in spirit” version appears.

I know that most of you are not as turned on by or interested in this side of biblical scholarship as I am but I find it fascinating - and freeing.

I gave a talk in here years ago that involved talking about the discrepancies in the Gospels. Afterwards, someone said to me, “I’ve read these stories for years and never noticed the glaring contradictions - like in the telling of the story of Jesus’

last days. Why didn't I see that before?" That's a great question. Why don't we see things that are right in front of our eyes? We often do not see something if we are not looking for it. One major criticism that can be leveled against low level religion is that it teaches people what to see and not how to look. Many good, faithful, church attending Christians have never been taught that the disciples of Jesus did not actually write the Gospel. The disciples were, like Jesus, lower-class, illiterate peasants who spoke Aramaic. The Gospels, on the other hand, were written by highly educated Greek-speaking Christians forty to sixty-five years later.

There was this period of time of oral transmission when stories and sayings were circulating, starting with eye-witnesses and, even more, among those who knew someone whose cousin had a neighbor who had once talked with a business associate whose mother had, just fifteen years earlier, spoken with an eyewitness who told her some things about Jesus.

So scholars have figured out ways to get at what was most likely what Jesus said and did. One of the things they use is a growing knowledge of archeological and literary discoveries of the time in which Jesus lived and taught and those who were his primary audience.

Jesus gave his teachings at a time when likely 80% of the population lived at the subsistence level. He was part of this society and system. If you read one of the Gospel narratives, and I'd suggest Mark, just pay attention to who it is who is the most upset by what Jesus has to say and what he does. Who is his audience? Who did he hang out with? Who most positively responded to what he had to say? Those called "lepers," other sick and infirm folk, despised people like tax collectors. He attracted those who had suffered the worst this world has to give. To these people he would say, "Blessed are the poor."

Since we aren't poor in the way Jesus is talking about, is there any way to see the ways in which we might, though having much, be poverty stricken?

I want to say a bit about the culture in which Jesus lived. Then, some things about our own. Then, how we might think of the prosperity that we enjoy in good ways.

Let's begin here:

If you look back over human history, from the beginning of recorded history until now, you will see that there are four basic social institutions that hold societies together. Knowing this, allows us to see what these societies likely mean by the things they taught and valued and, perhaps, make it possible for us to translate or appropriate the valuable things from their society to ours. Specifically we are trying to see something about the society in which Jesus lived and how what he taught might be relevant or make sense for us.

The four basic social institutions that hold societies together, then and now, are these:

First, there is the belonging system. This is the kinship and family system.

Second, there is the meaning system. This includes religion, religious beliefs and practice.

Third, how the society is organized or the political system.

Fourth, there is the production and consumption system. This is the economic system of a culture.

These are the four systems under which you can put everything else. Normally one of these dominates and the others are subsumed under it.

In the society in which Jesus lived and did his work, the dominant system was clearly the belonging system, the kinship system. The focus of the society was on the family, the private home. This is one of the reasons so many of the stories about Jesus, his teaching and deeds, describe him as going into someone's home or being at a meal in someone's house.

The house church was the dominant institution of the early Christian movement. These were small gatherings of people - not at all what we think of when we hear the word "church" today. They gathered and shared their memories and stories and a meal. One of the most significant of the social demonstrations of Jesus is in who

he ate with. The power and meaning of who he ate with has not only been highly underestimated but also became the basis for the church's Eucharist.

Three of these ways of holding society together - the political, the religious and the economic - are all based on some form of violence. I know those at the top of these systems would deny that but . . .

There is a spiritual truth we have to keep in front of us all the time. There are always two worlds. The world as it operates is power. The world as it should operate is love. What Jesus taught was how to live in both at the same time.

The world as it is will always be built on power, ego and success - however the culture defines it at the time. Yet, what the teachings of Jesus calls us to do is develop the practices to remind us that we live in the Sacred Heart of God. We are called to develop behaviors, even or especially with our resources, that reflect this belief.

Power apart from love leads to brutality.

Love that does not engage with power is mere sentimentality.

Jesus was executed because he was subversive to the system of his day. You simply don't question the bottom line of the system that holds a society together. Jesus was not killed because of what he taught about God but, rather, because of his world view.

I am not saying that we try to live in or have the world view that Jesus had. What I get from the teaching of Jesus, and your mileage may vary, is that we are to learn to live in both until they are one - at least in us.

So, the glue that held the world together during the time of Jesus was the belonging system. What group were you a part of? Did you belong or not? Were you clean or not? Did you honor your family or not?

Most of the people, over eighty percent, were not considered part of the "in group." Not to be was painful. The economic system of the day controlled that. It was

shameful to be “unclean.” There were elaborate rituals and rules and regulations that controlled who was pronounced clean or not. These were controlled by the religious system. So that when Jesus went about forgiving people and pronouncing them clean, he was messing with the livelihood of those people who made their money by performing those rituals.

There are those in our time who like to say that ours is a Christian nation, that the meaning system of our country is religion. I hope you know that isn't so. There have been times in history when this was perhaps true - during the Middle Ages, which gave us the Crusades. Today in those places where religion is or seeks to be the dominant system, like Islamic states or the ISIS movement, it scares us to death.

Politics is the meaning system in places like China, North Korea and Russia.

Our meaning system? Money.

And it is a spiritual issue. Profoundly so.

When we get to my favorite teaching in the Gospel of Thomas - If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you fail to bring forth what is within you, what you fail to bring forth will destroy you. - I will elaborate more on this. Here is a synopsis.

Jesus taught: who we really are are children of God. There is nothing to be afraid of. Though God protects us from nothing, God sustains us in everything. Your True Self is God.

Then, over time, by and because of the corruption of religion and matters like the Dark Ages, this Self that we are became something to be afraid of. Along come people like Freud to say, and indeed prove, that what had been squashed down into the unconscious was dangerous and you better have somebody accompany you if you wanted to venture within.

Then, when the modern economic system which we are a part of came into being, the Self became empty - the Empty Self. The self is something that needs to be

filled and to be made to feel good about itself. Hence, the birth of advertising, psychotherapy and the self-help industry.

An assumption that Jesus seems to make over and over is that the outsider, one outside the system, seems to have a head start on what he is teaching. Life has already freed them from the lie the rest of us cannot see. If the system people live in is a mess, those outside of it are at a distinct advantage.

No, I'm not suggesting we leave the system. We're not going to do that. I'm not sure we can. But, if we are not aware of how the system can trap and blind us, we're not going to come close to what Jesus has to say.

I mentioned in the preview that a prominent component of Jungian psychology is a concept called "complexes." A "complex" is a core pattern of emotions, memories, perceptions and wishes that reside at the unconscious level of our lives. Some event happens in the outer world that triggers us and we "get in a complex." My experience, both professionally and personally, is that we do not so much "have" complexes as they "have" us. The way I put it is that we "get captured." It is as if some dark hand from the unconscious reaches up and drags us into moods, behaviors and beliefs that we don't consciously choose. We, as we put it, "get had." Many of our most important decisions come from the unconscious part of our lives. Growing in freedom and love means to grow in awareness of what we don't know.

If we are blinded by power, position or possession; we are had by what we have. We are not free. When we feel our security is in some way threatened, we reflexively get defensive. If our identity is who we are in God and not in what we have, we are free.

One of Jesus teachings is, "What profit does it do a person if he or she gains the whole world, but loses his or her soul."

Well, we've gained the whole world. We have been born into the land of milk and honey - also a biblical teaching.

So I'm about to do something I'll bet you've never heard in church before. Instead of talking about the problems of having money or wealth and seeking to make people feel guilty about it, there are positive things we can say about and in favor of affluence. I'll just outline a few of these:

For one thing, affluence can free us to pursue the spiritual life. Without some degree of means we would never have been able to have gone to hear Ilia Delio in New Mexico and then have the resources to bring her here.

We are free to scrutinize, clarify and strengthen the fulfillment of our roles as responsible persons in the society of other human beings. The weak and the dispossessed don't have access to power. We do. We can speak in their behalf. Our challenge is, will we do that?

It is wrong and appalling that we have the money to fight any kind of war we want but not to provide outstanding education for all our children. Or, to insure their physical well-being. Not to take care of the children of our society, all of them, in every way is just shooting ourselves in the foot.

Another good word I have for affluence is that it can, if we allow ourselves to make wise and useful decisions, enhance human personhood. If we follow Jesus, what we want for every person is the enhancement of their dignity as a child of God, to give everyone an opportunity to be on a path of personal, relational and spiritual growth.

We have a program here at St. Paul's where children from the most disadvantaged of neighborhoods are brought here and paired with children from more affluent backgrounds. They spend time together. You know what they do together? Write poetry. They've even published a book of their poems and had a reading at the MFA.

Our affluence also can make possible the expansion and deepening of interpersonal relationships. Through travel and technology we can in fact be a global village, citizens of the world. I know some people don't like this or want it. But, boldly I would say, Jesus would. Blessed are the reconciling ones, those who put the broken human community back together.

I know that for many, the very acquiring of wealth destroys these values, but it doesn't have to be.

Affluence can also encourage an enhanced understanding of that Mystery we point to when we use the word God. Without, for example, the resources to build and maintain the Hubble telescope, we would not have come to the understanding of the mass of energy in which we live as being so enormous, so expansive, so creative, so entangled. So much so that we can't take it in, we are awestruck.

Nobody here is about to sell all they have and give it to the poor. That being the case, what are we to do? Join God, Sacred Mystery, in the ongoing creation in a way that pronounces it good, that we use what we have been given to reveal the character of this God as love, forgiving, inclusive, creative.

Jesus is very realistic about how difficult this is to do. The problems of this country, of this world, are not centered in the weak and the poor. They are centered in the strong and the wealthy. It is so easy to slip off the path of journeying into wholeness to the role of Egyptian taskmasters who enslave other people.

It is possible to gain the world and lose our souls. The tragedy in that, of course, is that we lose the world as well. Perhaps it would help us to come to love what we have been given, or entrusted with.

I believe there is a good future right around the corner. Yes, it is expensive. The good news is that we can afford it. What else does it mean to be a child of God.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.