

“Woe? Whoa!” (13Feb22)

Luke 6:17-26; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

You may have heard of the Sermon on the Mount, generally regarded as the most famous sermon of Jesus.

Well, this is from his plain ol’ sermon, the sermon on a level place, on a plain. These aren’t high-aspiring, lofty ideas, not how we climb up to God on a stairway to heaven, getting closer by being better, but maybe how God apprises our plain ol’ existence, God in our daily lives, with God’s perspective on our happiness and our woes.

I wouldn’t say Jesus here is telling you to seek ostracism and cause offense, as if that showed you have God’s approval. Nor is he suggesting you try to be hungry or weepy or poor. More like, if that has been your circumstance you’ll also know something else.

So if not striving for afterlife earnings and not really a directive, what does Jesus want you to know about the situation of your daily life?

A first of three thoughts comes from a writer who says it’s not just a few payback laughs to slightly compensate. He tells of a student who

had gone on a retreat at which an exercise was to chart the emotional peaks and valleys in your life. The next task was to locate when you were closest to God. Lo and behold, God was closest when one was broken, and sad. This isn’t a Pollyanna operation in which you say, “Gee, that wasn’t sad, after all.” It could have been terrible; nevertheless, you realize something that you didn’t when you were in the midst of it. This verse is not so much a compensatory justice as it is the divine comedy: the tragic and comic can never quite be separated. When you see that suffering and joy are not at war with one another, you are free.*

Another example for such blessed freedom goes with racism and white privilege. We white folk are accustomed to feel freer since life is overall easier for us and we have built in advantages of wealth and less trouble with law enforcement and so on. But maybe Jesus says Woe to us, because if that’s as big as we’re bound to imagine, we’re missing out. If we don’t see the blessing and gift of alleged “impoverishment” for us on behalf of racial

equity, then we’ll miss the transformation for the true freedom and joy God intends.

One more version to consider: I officiated at a funeral this week for a 34-year-old. I guess my words for that are privilege or honor. In preparation, I had one of those—indeed—strangely blessed moments that sometimes come around, at least in roles like mine: I got to sit with the family and hear stories about Brandon. There were details of struggles and fights and all kinds of long-suffering efforts. There were stories about drugs and trying to be clean and their anger at his so-called friends. There was background noise of his orphaned six-year-old son chasing around the house and the now-absent sounds from recordings of his heavy metal music. These brought tears, so many, his mother sobbing, piles of Kleenexes. There was disbelief about never seeing him again, all the things now unsayable, the shock that he was dead.

And there were also stories of his fun personality, from being a kid doing snowboard stunts while his arm was in a cast and tossing crayfish to a rabid raccoon until a police officer showed up and shot it, on to dismantling an old car in his driveway for parts and scrap, as well as amazing care and dedication for his grandparents after a stroke. And it brought so much laughter. Laughter in spite of and through weeping. From the silly things about Brandon on to probably the deepest appreciation and love for and delight in him the family had ever had. It was amazing to witness.

I’m not sure that’s what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Blessed are you who weep, for you will laugh,” that Jesus was saying a tragic and untimely death can be worth it since you’ll be able to look on the bright side and appreciate life even more.

I do believe we know the *je ne sais quoi* of it when it happens, and maybe in his sermon Jesus is inviting our eyes to open. I can extrapolate for Jesus from my own experience: there’s no way to make it happen in a sermon, no way to force or

*found at <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/epiphany6c/>

convince. There's only sort of laying it out, perhaps to be recognized and embraced and understood.

So maybe you've welcomed ways to change your daily life—in combatting racism or feeding the poor or whatever practice seems to our dominant culture like loss of giving something up but which you actually find as a blessing.

Maybe, as that teacher's student felt closer to God in the terrible valleys, maybe you have known that, too.

Through two years of the pandemic, we see plainly the weeping, reduced version of life that hungers for something else. This week our Confirmation students said they just longed to be around each other, to eat pizza inside, or even—with their new normal and delayed gratification—that more will be possible outdoors when it warms up. We know diminished daily life. For some of us it brings God closer and means richer prayers, deeper practice of hope, finding the blessing of laughter and delight and fulfillment that are so unexpected right now.

But, of course, for others it is forsakenness. The pandemic has fractured relationships, and the sorrows have been too deep. It's been easier to seek being filled in less satisfying and blessed forms and places. I'm sad about that. I, indeed, weep about it. But those woes, I trust, somehow will find blessedness.

While God may well surprise me sooner and we may realize something we couldn't in this midst, sometimes I confess my only way and best way to hope is looking to the notion of 1st Corinthians, that death is overcome, that weeping and mourning and pain will be no more, that God's divine comedy won't be satisfied with a compensatory chuckle, but will laugh in the face of death, and no matter how sad and far, how famished and diminished life had been, still we have the guarantee of a happy ending. That there is such promise—even through Brandon's death and dark valleys and through racism and pandemic and brokenness—is not to be pitied: it is a true blessing.