

Ordinary 6 2.17.19

I don't know anyone who intentionally sets out to be poor. Nor do I know anyone who hopes to go hungry, or desires to spend their days and nights weeping. I'm guessing that no one aspires to be hated, excluded, insulted, or denounced as evil by others.

But in today's gospel, Jesus says that those who are poor, those who are hungry, those who weep, and those who are rejected are blessed.

I find this gospel - officially titled the Sermon on the Plain - to be disturbing. It goes against my grain and stands in contrast to the American Dream that is held up before us as the measure of all that should be good in our lives.

What's going on here?

Perhaps a better understanding of the culture of Jesus' time would help to shed light on this challenging passage. For the person of faith in Jesus' time, it was understood that wealth, success, good health, and social acceptance were hallmarks of God's blessings. The logic goes something like this: if you are faithful to God, then you will have riches, food, friends, and flattery in abundance. If you don't have these things, you must have sinned or some member in your family has sinned – and God is punishing you with this kind of suffering or poverty for what you have done or failed to do.

In two thousand years, not much has changed with regard to our expectations and the topic of material reward. In our culture, we say things like, "you can do anything you want. If you just work hard enough, you can achieve and get anything." If someone is poor or lacking something, we think or even articulate out loud that it's probably because they just haven't put in enough effort. We categorize folks like that as lazy, weak, not worthy of reward or material gain – because, more than likely, they just haven't made the effort to earn those material goods.

In today's culture, we also deal with the perception that material goods and wealth will bring happiness. Think back a bit to the days and weeks leading up to Christmas. We were shown (repeatedly) that if we cared for our spouse, REALLY cared for them, then we would make sure that a new Lexus or Mercedes would appear in our driveway for them on Christmas morning. And the not-so-subliminal message is, "you don't really care for him or her if you don't buy that car." Well, most Americans must not love their spouses, because most Americans didn't buy a car for their spouse at Christmas. And the commercials keep coming. Get that car, perfume, phone and phone plan, vacation...go to Disney World, Busch Gardens, on a Viking Cruise, or the beaches...and you will be happy.

In today's readings, Jesus and the prophet Jeremiah were challenging that perception of reality – a perception and way of looking at things that remains with us to this day. Both Jesus and Jeremiah are forcefully reminding us that material goods will not bring ultimate happiness. And those who lack material goods or wealth are not to be thought of as less-than or ostracized because of their lack of possessing material goods.

The reality is that being a person in need, or being sorrowful, or ostracized are common experiences. Everyone faces their fair share of disappointment and loss. Some people, through no fault of their own, are burdened by extraordinary suffering and deprivation. No one wants these types of experiences, but everyone faces them at some time or another. Through his preaching and witness, Jesus offers a redeeming possibility for living in a world where suffering and tragedy befall us.

In light of the challenge offered by Jesus and Jeremiah, ask yourselves these questions: what sort of person would you be if the occasional deprivation and loss you experience made you more empathetic toward the sufferings of others? What sort of person would you be if the normal and extraordinary sorrows you feel made you more compassionate toward the people in your life? What sort of person

would you be if the neglect and disrespect you endure made you more tolerant, generous, and charitable?

Jesus reminds us to be the sort of person you imagine you'd like to come to comfort you in your sorrows, nourish YOU when you are deprived, and console YOU when you are mistreated. Everyone knows what it means to suffer; not everyone knows what it means to be consoled. You are blessed when you choose a life that demonstrates the reality and presence of God's compassion for others.

There is a tension that faces us at this point and time in history. That tension is profoundly present when we look at protecting our nation's borders at the same time offering compassion and protection for those fleeing unimaginable poverty and threats of death. That tension is profoundly present when we look to be fiscally responsible while seeking to feed those who have no ability to grow or buy food for themselves or their families.

While there are no simple solutions to these complex and polarizing issues, the presence of that tension should make us more mindful, more deliberate, more intent on deliberating what God wants us to do or be for others.

If we have financial security, food on our tables, joy and happiness, and the blessing of close friends and family, we should thank the Father for those blessings. If we are blessed, our Catholic faith, in turn, obliges us to share those blessings in order to lift up those who are bowed down and those who experience deprivation and want.

We aren't guaranteed eternal life based on the amount of wealth we possess, based on our good health, or based on the positive reputation we enjoy. Rather, Jesus will judge us by how we use our blessings in order to bless one another – especially the poor, those who mourn, those who suffer, and those who are ostracized.

Today's gospel is a challenge to us – folks who are greatly blessed compared to the vast majority of people in the world. May what we hear and reflect on in today's readings make us think about how we are to live, how we are to share with those who are in need, and how loving we are to be toward those outside of our particular or familial circle. As the gospel writer St. Luke so aptly sums up in chapter 6, verse 38 which we will hear proclaimed at Masses next Sunday: ***for the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.***

Amen? Amen!