

Sermon: Vowing Poverty?

To hear Jesus' beatitudes according to Luke aright, we must remember, first off, that Luke does not write to us ... we are merely among the fortunate beneficiaries who – for nearly two millennia – have *interloped* into Luke's correspondence with "your excellency, Theophilus". This was a man highly placed in Syrian society, which is to acknowledge that he was rich. And, he was a recent Gentile convert to Christianity. In the Gospel's prologue, Luke states his purpose: his is an orderly, carefully researched account, so that Theophilus "may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (as a recent convert).

Luke's message to well-to-do Theophilus has a constant thrust. In story after story, *beginning* with the conception narratives about John and Jesus and then *in everything* that follows, Theophilus reads about the lowly being lifted up, the outcast being restored, and the powerful and the rich being torn down. The biggest gut-punch of all, I'd suggest, comes in today's passage. Remember, here Jesus is amongst a great crowd of people (not only from all-across Israel but also from the Gentile coast of Tyre and Sidon) [people] who came seeking his healing. His entire band of disciples and his newly appointed twelve are, of course, present. In the midst of the day's activity, Luke *focuses us in* on Jesus turning to his disciples (not to the multitude beyond, but just his disciples) and saying to them,

"How honourable are you [my disciples] who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹"How honourable are you [my disciples] who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "How honourable are you [my disciples] who weep now, for you will laugh.

... and so on through the first section; and then:

²⁴"But how shameless are you [my disciples] who are rich, ... who are full now, ... who are laughing now, ...

for

you have received your consolation ... you will be hungry ... you will mourn and weep.

One recent commentator summarizes Theophilus's likely reaction in the one word: "Yikes!"

Which has been my reaction, too, to a lesser or greater degree, across much of my lifetime as a Christian whose social location is high ... I am privileged, as an educated white cis-male Protestant Christian in twentieth and twenty-first century North America.

Today, we look at Theophilus, look at ourselves, and look to Jesus in Luke's account in order to ask, and hear, what is Gospel?

We do so building upon things we learned last week, when we looked at Christian asceticism:

- The monks who patterned their lives in imitation of Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness;

and then

- St. Francis whose imitation was – yes – of the poverty of Jesus, but living it amongst – as brother to! – the city's poor.

Back in the second century of the Common Era, the experience of local churches

- i. having ascetics living in their midst, and
- ii. *knowing the scriptures – such as Luke's beatitudes – undergirding the ascetics' 'way'*

[this experience] posed an existential question: Were ordinary Christians – living an active life in the world, marrying, working to have homes and raise families, observing (arguably to lesser degree) the precepts of Christ – [were they] an inherently inferior type of Christian? Some early Church Fathers suggested they were.

But the question is actually misconstrued. A distortion enters by way of the beatitude which we probably all learned as "Blessed are the poor". Consciously or unconsciously, we construct *with it* a logic sequence:

1. I wish to be blessed.
2. Jesus says the poor are blessed.
3. I must be poor to be blessed.

And then comes the “Yikes!”.

There are two mistakes here. One is an oversimplification and we’ll address it first.

Remember with me that the words “rich” and “poor” are descriptors being spoken within near-eastern honour-shame society; whose society’s world-view, furthermore, is clear about ‘the supply of all things being limited/finite’. “Poor” means a person / a family who has not been able to maintain the honour (the standing) they were born into, either because of misfortune or by the injustice of others. Such people are religiously, economically, politically and domestically vulnerable. “Rich” means one who has gained standing (i.e. land, possessions, wealth, power) beyond what they and their family were born into, and – in the closed system of the world – this means they have ‘gained at the expense of others’. Rich is synonymous with greedy. Acquisition is understood as theft.

An honourable person/family is interested only in what is rightfully theirs, and has no interest in gaining more.

What we need to realize here *inside the Beatitudes*, then, is **this completely (i) unspoken (ii) undergirding social norm**: that, if-and-when society is operating correctly / justly / by-design, then there are no rich nor poor. Everybody is functioning at their honour standing. And everybody’s honour standing is the same.

So, Jesus’ sermon talks about those who are the social *outliers*. In the context of his immediate audience, this makes sense because the majority of his disciples are ‘outlier poor’. Though, by the fact that he so emphatically addresses them, there also are ‘the rich’. The big insight I highlight for you today is that, here, he makes no mention of those

whose honour standing is continuous because their standing need neither be lifted up nor torn down.

- We listen in as Jesus calls out, as “shameless”, the rich among his band, challenging their theft-acquired position and warning of a stark reversal ahead (upon their *over-extended* standing’s collapse).
- **What is first and foremost** in his address, though, is his elevation of the status (the honour) of the poor among his disciples. The world has deemed them unkosher, undesirable, undeserving, unwanted. Jesus, in his sight *and here he insists in his body-of-believer’s sight*, [Jesus] says of them “How honourable!”, and he promises them hope through a seismic reversal ahead, that pulls down the rich. *Then*, they will eat and laugh (no longer starve and mourn). What’s more, unspoken here but otherwise clarified by Luke: now, *in the community of Jesus’ followers*, these poor ones already get (they must get!) to taste and see and live out their God-intended honor.

Clarity about that middle stratum of people – neither rich nor poor – is the first ‘straightening out’ piece to our otherwise-distorted logic about the beatitudes. The second piece rests in the Greek word, *makarios*, translated as “blessed” in the King James and Revised Standard Versions of the beatitudes. Please know that there is a second Greek word equally at use in our New Testament, “*eulogia*”, which also comes into English as “blessed”. It (*eulogia*) is about having favour bestowed by someone (a patron) who can grant such favour. There is a transaction. It provides for, saves and protects; it makes ‘effective change’ ... the sort of change believers seek from God. It is not, however, the topic of the beatitudes, where Jesus speaks of *makarios*, sometimes translated “happy”, more adequately (and culturally appropriately) heard by us as “how honourable”. *Makarios* is a straightforward observation about a person’s state; there is no seeking or bestowing of blessing involved here. In other words, there is nothing in the Greek of the Beatitudes that would have one ‘go thinking about (i)

renouncing one's place in the world and (ii) seeking poverty as means to obtaining blessing from God.

The distortions have been straightened out; now we can answer the question:

- The whole social band of Christians who are (i) living in and working to contribute to the life of the world, (ii) doing so without striving for more-and-more (not striving to become “rich”), (iii) seeking social justice for the “poor” ... they are in fact the theoretical social norm.
- Those who are “the poor” are now to be seen through the eyes of Christ – not through the eyes of the world – and therefore are *makarios* / “how honourable”.
- Those disciples / followers who are rich, who are living with more than the just-and-fair allotment of the closed-system-Earth's resources and greedily seeking more-and-more power and wealth, are called out as shameless. Theophilus – you hear it, right? – is being called by Luke as shameless. But note that Luke's Jesus also “blesses” him in this way: In his ‘coming out’ as Christian and his ‘doing the redistributing of personal resource’ that is incumbent on him (as Luke makes explicit elsewhere), Theophilus can count on his peers ‘hating him, excluding him, reviling him and defaming him on account of the Son of Man’, and in that, O Theophilus, “How honourable are you ... Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”
- Then must come for us an important (and challenging!) ‘footnote’: That ‘middle social band’, neither rich nor poor, has mathematical definition because of the overarching (and correct!) ‘limited goods understanding’ of existence. Divide available ‘sustainable resources’ by the number of people and you find how much each person justly ought to have. When you do that across the globe,

there comes a challenge to us in the western world. While our political, social and economic engines incessantly call us to super-size, our faith calls upon our entire society to simplify. Remember the 1976 book, “Living on Less, Liking it More”? It is not about vowing poverty, but it is about vowing and pursuing justice.

The world *nearly two millennia after the last biblical writings* is unchanged

- in terms of the earth being a closed system,
- in terms of there being ways of life that *do* justly share the resources,
- in terms of those who worship Mammon being – in actuality – greedy shameless thieves,
- in terms of all the impoverished, wounded, side-lined ones being – in God’s truth – honourable, and
- in terms of ‘*coming* collapses and reversals’, the next round inescapably soon because the earth is beyond its tipping point in sustaining human strife and greed.

Another unchanged thing is that people who make choices and live their lives like the man Francis of Assisi did, and thousands others have done ... well, they are Saints, and we are inspired by them, challenged and moved by them. We surely need them!

- In certainty, *there are people here*, and scads more across the world, who *have made* and *now make* choices that are ‘renouncing ones’ ... maybe not to the extent of Francis, but significant and honourable choices. We need them; we need you!:
 - People who make myriad life-decisions, career-choices and volunteer activity commitments not chasing the most returns but pursuing the greater service to humanity and to the earth. How honourable!

The most fitting way we end this sermon is with prayer; and I propose we do so by joining with St. Francis himself. Let us together sing his prayer for peace ...