

A Tale of Woe

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Upon first hearing the woes of this scripture, one can find their heart beating faster and their hands becoming a little damp. There's no way out, Jesus is talking about us. For who among us is not rich - at least in the context of the entire world? What about fullness - did you have breakfast? Do you expect to have lunch? Will you perhaps eat mindlessly while watching a football game this evening? And then laughter - I don't even know how to think of laughter as something not to prize. Judging by the ease with which laughter erupts in this community - I suspect you are guilty of this woe as well. And the last one - do people speak well of you? Is it possible you tailor your conversation so as not to bring up any of the unpleasant or controversial topics that Jesus calls us to confront? Is that perhaps a strategy to ensure being liked? Could that be said of you?

Hearing the consequence that Jesus proposes for each of these is chilling; poverty, mourning, hunger, being hated, excluded.

But wait - who among us has not experienced poverty - if not of money then of spirit? Who hasn't mourned? Wept? I've sat in this room to the sound of sobbing; I've listened to the sound of my own tears. Hungry? Sometimes it feels like I can eat and eat and eat and never be filled. Sometimes it feels like my hunger is bottomless. Sometimes it feels like I don't know what I am hungering for. And being excluded? We all went to middle school, didn't we? Revile you and defame you on account of the son of man - on account of Jesus? We may not immediately see that as an infliction we suffer from but perhaps you encounter it when you speak up as Jesus tells you to: when you speak up for justice; when you challenge stereotypes or introduce controversial concepts such as White Privilege or government sponsored child care. Are you sure you'll be invited next Thanksgiving?

Upon first hearing this scripture, it sounded like we were being separated - the blessing people and the woe people. The good weepers and the bad laughers. Even though I haven't heard your responses - I'd be surprised if almost all of us haven't been able to claim both blessings and woes. The blessed and woeful are parts of each of us.

Jesus is not dividing us so much as he is asking us what defines our life? What are we satisfied with and don't want to change; what are we afraid will be taken from us? And what we work at to make us feel safe.

Jesus wants us to be aware of what it is that supplants him, what we substitute for complete trust in Him. What is it that draws us away from him. What consumes us so that we don't let Jesus in.

I confess that these words of Ebenezer Scrooge could come from my heart, my mouth:

“There is nothing on which the world is so hard as poverty, and there is nothing it professes to condemn with such severity as the pursuit of wealth!”

It isn't wealth that threatens our relationship with Jesus, it is what wealth displaces. When wealth is the source of our peace, our safety - first, we are badly mistaken in counting on it; second, will we ever have enough? And third, does the pursuit of wealth lead us away from turning to faith as the sustaining element in our life. The same could be said for weeping and laughing - I will never eschew laughter; laughter is a gift from God; God offers it as a reward for mourning just a few verses before. But hoping and engineering our lives so that laughter can distract us from the pain of life is what the book of Sirach calls the laughter of fools. God delights in our joy and laughter but despairs when we reject the fullness of being human.

Once a little girl in Manila asked the visiting Pope Francis why God allows children to suffer. She had just told him in front of a million people that she scrounged food from the garbage and slept outside on a cardboard mat.

Then he admonished everyone to quiet down and pay close attention because, he said, “She has just asked the one question with no answer.”

He said to her, “We can't answer you now. Only when we are able to weep about the things you have lived will we understand anything and be able to answer you.”

Then he taught the crowd that the world needs to weep. The marginalized weep, the scorned weep, the sick and dying weep – but we who are privileged, we don't always know how. We must learn. The Pope concluded, saying, “If you don't learn to weep, you're not a good Christian.”

I might be tempted to add you are not a full human. But it is not so simple as to say when we are mournful, when we are poor, when we are blessed and when we are woeful. There are layers, and frames and reframing. Let us uncover some of those as we enter a time of meditation.