

Year C-Epiphany6-2019-Standing on a Level Place

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Luke 6:17-26

Blessed are you who are Poor

How can being poor be a blessing? I am reading a book entitled, Life at the End of Us verses Them by Marcus Peter Rempel. Rempel lives on a communal farm in Manitoba where they do their best to live off the land. They don't have indoor plumbing but they do have an interesting life. Rempel has a chapter with a sub-section entitled "The Meaning of Poverty." I want to quote from it but the language is a little too rich in organic nitrogen for sermons so I am going use the code word, "I do my business." Marcus starts out:

I do my business in a bucket. Does this mean that I am poor?

I also co-own 144 acres of farmland. Does this mean I'm rich? I spend my summers bending my back, working outside, with dirt under my fingernails. Does that mean I'm poor? I find restaurant food sub-par compared to my regular diet of made-from-scratch meals, loaded with meat and organic produce. Does that mean I am rich? Our family's after tax income last year was about \$25,000. The poverty line for a Canadian family our size is calculated at \$34,829. Does that mean we are poor? We own two vehicles, one of which is a 2003 Mercedes Benz SUV, sold to us for a silly low price because the seller likes us, and I think because she thinks we are poor. Does that mean we are rich?

I suspect that all of these are beside the point. What makes me a wealthy man, I think, has much to do with the fact that I am not ashamed of any of the above facts, but instead am pleased with them.

Rempel has been delivered from all shame at being poor and all guilt at being rich. His single criterion for living is being a follower of Christ in whatever context he and his family find themselves. They are not excessively bound by what other's think or afraid that others will judge them harshly. They don't take themselves too seriously; well not usually. As Marcus says:

Okay, the Mercedes is kind of embarrassing—but also kind of fun. Our family used to sing Janis Joplin's "Mercedes Benz" at the top of our lungs while driving down the road in our plebeian Honda Civic:

O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz
My friends all drive Porsches,
I must make amends

Worked hard all my lifetime,
no help from my friends
O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz.

Joplin's lampooning of the "health and wealth" Gospel was delicious to us as we laughed at the silliness of praying to a great shiny Car Dealer in the Sky. And then, when we weren't looking for it, we got a Mercedes, which we have taken to be God's laugh on us.

But here's where things get complicated. For while I am happy "doing my business in a bucket, Aboriginal communities in Manitoba are trying to get my larger and privileged Mennonite faith community to lend their voice to those of local chiefs, who are challenging the government to address the scandal that in the twenty-first century, Aboriginal reserves (reservations) still lack basic plumbing. That is to say, they have to "do their business" in buckets.

Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Maybe that has to be with poverty you have chosen, that you feel good about because it delivers you from oppression and the hurting of others. Maybe it can't be a poverty that has been forced upon you and that you feel demeaned by.

Marcus feels dignity because he has chosen to live without indoor plumbing. The Indigenous folk, now confined to a reservation and prevented from living the life style they would choose, feel demeaned. They got socked in two ways. They lost what they valued in having unfettered access to the great outdoors and never gained what they had been promised when they were told they would have the amenities of the suburbs. Are they blessed? Rempel points out that forced humility is humiliation. We know that abject poverty will be reversed in God's kingdom because God is a God of abundance. Did Jesus not say blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled and blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh? I warned you that this would get complicated.

Maybe we need to think about "positive poverty." That might include deciding to voluntarily live on less so that others, including our children in the future, may simply live. We could think of this in terms of how much pollution we are willing to pump into the air, how many streams we are willing to contaminate and how efficiently we turn the sun's energy into protein needed by every inhabitant of the planet. Yes, maybe we decide to be self-sacrificing but there is a joy in that when we lovingly consider its impact on our co-inhabitants on earth. Blessed are the poor for yours is the kingdom of God. It's not "yours will be" the kingdom of God but yours "is" the kingdom of God. It's something you experience now, as you live.

In the days when Luke wrote his Gospel it was universally accepted that the blessed were always the rich; the rich being rich was proof of God's blessing. But Jesus said blessed are you who are poor. It was in total contradiction to the story they had been told. Very quickly after this he said "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Having much may be a woe in ways we can't see. In fact, Jesus said it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. This metaphor reduces our thinking to molecular biology until we learn that one of the gates in Jerusalem was so small you couldn't get a loaded camel through it without removing its pack. They called it the "Camel Gate." Not only can you not take it with you at the end of life; it's hard to bring it with you in the midst of life if your goal is participation in the kingdom of God.

On Valentines night Laura and I went out to eat at one of our favorite restaurants in Oregon City. The people running it are Peruvian, very kind and give us hugs just like we do here at church. Ernesto, a gifted Pilipino guitarist, provided music and the food was wonderful. Beside us was a table where at least twelve people, dressed commonly, with a range of ages from very old to young and very handsome. They began passing a microphone around their table and singing with the music. The first to sing that I noticed was a younger man with long raven-black hair and full beard who was short of stature with massive, powerful shoulders and quick movements. His voice was gruff and he reminded me of a Mongolian warrior, though that impression dissipated when he smiled. Soon another man took the microphone and began singing. He looked very old and totally unremarkable though obviously foreign. At this point I wondered if they were all a little drunk. He too had a gravelly voice that, though low, was somehow astonishingly musical. Sounding like Louie Armstrong, he sang song after song without a script, totally lost in his music. The impromptu concert ended with a throaty version of "What a Wonderful World." Everyone was deeply moved, the family was proud and smiled at us, and the guitarist clearly felt the moment.

We didn't know who they were, whether they were rich or poor, or where they had come from and it didn't matter. We lost all sense of division and felt richly blessed in the moment. There was no "us" and "them," no rich and poor, no local and foreign, only the Kingdom of God where all are welcome.

Later we found out they were all Pilipino, family of the guitarist. The raven-haired younger man was a famous boxer who had traveled the world. The old man was a jazz singer who either had sung at Carnegie Hall or could have; I couldn't quite make it out. Laura and I shook hands with them and expressed our gratitude. As we left we felt blessed and in touch with our common humanity. Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Amen.