

6th Sunday Ordinary Time, C

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have some big problems with today's gospel. I would rather be rich than poor. I would rather be full than hungry. I would rather laugh than weep. And I would rather be spoken well of than be hated, excluded, insulted, and denounced my name as evil.

What about you? Who is with me? Any of you have problems with today's gospel?

Today's gospel doesn't align well with the values of a capitalist society, our constitutional right to **"the pursuit of happiness,"** or our personal programs for happiness. It is a hard gospel to hear for anyone who has been taught or come to believe that happiness is the primary goal in life.

It is interesting that in the prayers of the faithful we pray for the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, and yet, Jesus says they are blessed. What about those to whom Jesus says, **"Woe to you?"** Why don't we pray for them? If we took to heart today's gospel, shouldn't we pray for them?

For the rich in bondage to their assets. For all who are full and successful but have no satisfaction or meaning. For all who laugh to hide or avoid the pain of their life. For all who seek or find their identity and value in being spoken well of by others.

I wonder if we don't pray for them because they look and sound happy and for most of us happiness is the goal. I wonder if we don't

pray for them because we don't want to face those aspects in our own lives.

What if, however, the goal of life is not happiness but meaning? What if the gospel of Christ is not just another program for happiness? And what if blessings and woes are guideposts for living a life of meaning?

I am not suggesting that Jesus and the gospel are opposed to our happiness. I am suggesting that there is something deeper and more lasting than happiness. Happiness is circumstantial, dependent upon what is or is not happening. We have all experienced that. One day we are happy and another day we are not. Circumstances change.

Isn't that that what today's gospel saying? Those who are hungry will be filled and those who are full will be hungry. Those who are laughing will weep and those who are weeping will laugh. That's true in each of our lives, about each of the blessings and each of the woes.

Jesus is describing the pattern of our lives. Think how often we cycle back and forth between days of blessing and days of woe. Go down the list of blessings and woes and you will find every one of them in your life: poverty, hunger, weeping, to be spoken ill of, richness, fullness, laughing, and to be spoken well of.

It is easy and tempting to set blessings and woes in opposition, to see one as better and more desirable than the other, and to wonder which category we fall into. Jesus is not, however, establishing a hierarchy between blessings and woes. Luke makes a point of telling us that Jesus

“stood on a stretch of level ground” when he spoke about blessings and woes. Jesus is leveling the ups and downs of our lives. He is inviting us to look beyond the circumstances that happen day to day and find meaning in every day.

And let's not forget that today's gospel happens in the context of healing. **“a great crowd of his disciples and a large number of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon... came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and even those who were tormented by unclean spirits were cured.”**

Maybe that context of healing is the context in which we need to hear and understand the blessings and woes.

What if blessings are not a reward and woes are not a punishment? What if blessings and woes are not categories of two different kinds of people? What if there are aspects in each of our lives to which Jesus says, **“Blessed are you?”** What if there are aspects in each of our lives to which Jesus says, **“Woe to you?”** And what if both are said with a desire for our wholeness and intended for our healing?

The blessings and woes are not a conclusion made, or a status given by Jesus. They are insights about our lives for us to consider, lenses through which to see ourselves and understand our lives.

Look at poverty, hunger, and weeping in your life today. Look at the richness, fullness, and laughing in your life today. Listen to what others are saying about you.

The question is not, **“Which one of those am I?”** The question is, **“In what ways are all of those a part of my life and what do they mean for me today?”**

What are the blessings and woes telling or showing you? In what ways do they enlarge and enliven your life, and in what ways do they narrow and constrict your life? Do they align with and support the values you claim to hold and the life you want to live, or do they impede and contradict the life you want to live and the way you want to be? What are they asking of you? In what ways might they be energizing, obstructing, or redirecting your life? How are they affecting your relationships? What are they pointing to that needs your attention and work today?

The answers to those questions and a thousand others like them are insights that open our eyes and heart to a life of meaning and wholeness. They are insights that help us discern the life that wants to enter the world through us. But it takes more than insight. We also need courage to live a life of meaning in the world, and the endurance to do so in the face of opposition from others as well as ourselves.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

That is difficult and often painful work, and it asks a lot of us. Is it worth the effort? Well, go home, read the excluded verses from today’s gospel and listen what it says: **“power came forth from him and healed them all.”** Woe to us, woe to us who just want to be happy.