

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - Blessed to Be a Blessing - November 1, 2020
Revelation 7:9-12, 16-17 and Matthew 5:1-12

In 1992, Eric Clapton recorded an album for the MTV Unplugged series. Among the acoustic tracks featured there was a blues standard called “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out.” Originally released by Jimmy Cox in 1923, it tells a cautionary tale about the American excesses of the Roaring Twenties, and of the fickle nature of fame and fortune.

Clapton sings,

Once I lived the life of a millionaire,
Spent all my money, I just did not care.
Took all my friends out for a good time.
Bought bootleg liquor, champagne and wine.
Then I began to fall so low,
Lost all my good friends, I did not have nowhere to go.

In your pocket, not one penny.
And as for friends, you don’t have any.
When you finally get back up on your feet again,
Everybody wants to be your old long-lost friend.
Said it’s mighty strange, without a doubt,
Nobody knows you when you’re down and out.

In these lyrics, we find the inverse of the American myth. Rather than highlighting the dramatic transformation of one’s life from rags to riches, here we encounter one who was living the so-called good life before swiftly being brought down low. In an instant, he loses his financial standing, and with it a series of shallow relationships. Suddenly gone are the hangers on - those who will gladly celebrate

Mardi Gras with him one day, before feigning ignorance as to why the streets are so dirty and his pockets are so empty the next.

In our second lesson this morning, when Jesus beckoned the crowd to join him on the mountain, and delivered his famous sermon there, he was speaking to people who were overwhelmingly poor. Individuals whose lived experience affirmed this claim that “nobody knows you when you’re down and out.” Consistently, these were the ones who had been on the outside looking in. Going about life largely unnoticed. Without honor. Without dignity. Without justice. These were the ones who were hungry for a good word and eager for a great reversal. And that day, Jesus did not disappoint them.

As one scholar reminds us, “God’s purposes are to lift up those who are burdened and broken, shoved to the margins, left at the bottom of the heap.”¹ Granted, a complete reversal is unlikely to be fully realized in one’s lifetime. Still, followers of Jesus Christ need not be discouraged. For those so often on the receiving end of the world’s rejections and scorn are also the ones “more likely to be aware of [the] need for God’s loving presence and life-giving hope.”²

¹ Moiso, Amy. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 3*. Edited by Joel B. Green, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2020. Pg. 438.

² Moiso, 438.

As Psalm 121 proclaims, “I lift my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Friends, if we truly believe this - that our help comes from the Lord, then we can quickly identify our many wayward pursuits. We soon become aware of how much time and energy we spend searching for help in all of the wrong places. Longing for power and prestige, wealth and distractions that never truly satisfy.

And it is here that the ancient world and our present reality meet. For in each case there is a fundamental misunderstanding, rooted the wayward belief that abundance is essentially and primarily material.³ On one hand is the good life that the world promises, described in material terms and as the pursuit of the American Dream. And on the other hand is abundant life made known in Christ, which is the pursuit of authentic wealth. The so-called good life is individualistic and me-centered, and is contrasted with “the abundant life is characterized by the extension of compassion to all of creation.”⁴

³ Schut, Michael, and Bill McKibben. *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*. Church Publishing, 2009. Pg. 10.

⁴ Schut and McKibben, 10.

Friends, it is this life - the abundant life – that Jesus professed on the mountainside. In calling the disciples together, he gave them a new way of life. “He gave them a new way to deal with violence – by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money – by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership – by drawing upon the gifts of every member, even the most humble.”

5

It is from this perspective that we rightly understand Jesus’ sermon as a summons to “live a life worthy of the coming kingdom of God, regardless of any earthly rewards.”⁶ For while none of us “is asked to go out and try to be poor in spirit or to mourn or to be meek... Jesus is indicating that given the reality of the kingdom we should not be surprised to find among those who follow him those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek.”⁷

Today, in the presence of a global pandemic, it does not require much effort on our part to identify those who are suffering. We can readily name those with ill health and those whose finances have been disrupted. We know that many are afraid. We can see it in their eyes at the grocery store. And we know that today, on

⁵ Hauerwas, Stanley. *Matthew, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Edited by R.R. Reno, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2006. Pg. 67.

⁶ Alfaro, 436.

⁷ Hauerwas, 61.

Remembrance Sunday, we take our place alongside our brothers and sisters in faith who are mourning the loss of loved ones.

Still, Jesus reminds us that even when the challenges of this world feel like anything but a blessing, we are still called blessed people of God. Entrusted with the good news of the gospel. Surrounded by the saints of every age. Built upon a solid rock, and encouraged along the right road. For in every season of life, we will find him there. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.