

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “A Perspective on Suffering”

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What a wild week for weather around here in the Pacific Northwest! We will be remembering the snow storms of February 2019 for a long time. I never thought I would hear myself say this...but I am actually rejoicing at the idea of a month or two of 40 degrees and rain. Hallelujah! That is life out here in the Pacific Northwest though. You know what the Seattle native said to the Pillsbury Doughboy? Nice Tan! What do Seattleites call a day of sunshine after two days of rain? Monday! And, the funny thing is we will probably be complaining about the heat next August...like we always do. This weekend's Gospel reading comes at a good time. As much as we can sometimes be tempted to complain about whatever “suffering” life throws at us, Jesus offers us an interesting perspective. Let's listen to Luke's beatitudes again. “Blessed are you who are poor” “Blessed are you who are now hungry” “Blessed are you who are now weeping” “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you, and denounce your name as evil on account of the Son of Man.”

What are we to make of these beatitudes? At first glance, they sounds insane. Let's begin with the first one. Blessed are you when you are poor? Who here wants to be poor, raise your hand? No one likes to be poor! Blessed are we when we are poor? Come on! Blessed are you when you are hungry? Who likes to be hungry, raise your hand! And it gets worse! Blessed are you when you are weeping? This sounds rather masochistic at face value. No one likes to feel depressed. Where is Jesus going with this? Blessed are you when you are hated and excluded and insulted...Now wait just one minute! No one likes to be hated. Where is the “good news” in Jesus' words?

This kind of teaching is typical of Jesus' preaching style. He constantly tries to turn our world upside-down by his words, shaking our world view so that we can gain a new perspective. I picked up from Bishop Barron once that the best way to understanding the Gospel reading today is looking at the Greek word used for “Blessed” in Luke's Gospel. The word here is *macarius*. It can also be translated as “lucky”. This insight can help us better understand these beatitudes and what Jesus means by them.

Let's start with lucky are you who are poor. Why? What I think Jesus means by this is: you are lucky to not be attached to material things. Like St. Augustine taught in his Confessions, there is a God shaped hole in each of our hearts that has an infinite longing for God. Our hearts crave God. But instead of filling that God shaped hole with things that are of God, we end up filling that hole with things that are not of God. This is not to denounce material goods per se. Material goods, cars, televisions, and the latest electronics can be just fine so long as we don't become too attached or addicted to them. But what happens to many people is that our hearts become too attached to material goods. I buy a smart phone, and in a few months the excitement wears off and I want to buy a better smartphone. And instead of investing more time in the relationships around us, we can spend too much time staring into our electronics. It can be like an addiction, as

many of us know. We are a society addicted to material things and technologies that ultimately do not satisfy the longings of the human heart. And so Jesus says, lucky are you who are poor. Why? You are not addicted to material things.

Jesus says, lucky are you who are hungry. Why? You are not addicted to sensual pleasure. Now food, drink and bodily pleasures are good for the most part. They are gifts from God. But once again, they can become addictive and start becoming an unhealthy replacement for our infinite craving for God. Sensual pleasures are good, but they can get out of control. We can look at how many billions of dollars that companies make selling alcohol, tobacco, pornography, marijuana, opioids and the list goes on. Is this excess reflective of a spiritual problem in our country today? Yes, it is. Let's just name it. Yes, it is. Jesus says, lucky are you who are hungry. Why? You are not addicted to sensual pleasure.

Jesus says, lucky are you who are weeping. Why? You are not addicted to good feelings. Now good feelings are wonderful, they are a gift from God. But they too can become addictive when the soul replaces God with the need for feeling good all the time. Life becomes a quest for good feelings instead of a quest for holiness. Do you follow me? A common sense piece of wisdom we all learn at some point in life: Some of the best things we experience in this life do not necessarily "feel" good all the time. Real love, real compassion, real self-control, real social justice, real sacrifice, and real non-violence are things that do not always "feel" good in the moment. A fair measure of the civil rights we enjoy today came about after much suffering in our country. Blessed are you who are weeping. Why? You are not addicted to feeling "good" all the time. You are living your life with integrity and strength of character, in good times and in bad, in sunshine and yes even in snow.

Jesus says, lucky are you when you are hated. Why? You are not addicted to the esteem of others. Now the esteem of others is a good thing in and of itself most of the time. Being liked by others is certainly not a bad thing. But this too can become addictive. Life can be changed from a quest for holiness to a quest for being praised all the time. The hunger for praise can turn into an idol that is not God. As Jesus warns, woe to you if all speak well of you. Lucky and blessed are you if you hook your desires on pleasing God even when this is not popular in our culture all the time.

My friends, to summarize the beatitudes, let us gaze for a moment on the cross. Look at the cross. Is Jesus poor? Yes, he is naked on the cross. Is Jesus hungry? Yes, he hadn't eaten since the previous evening. Is Jesus weeping? Yes, he is in pain and he is dying. Is Jesus hated? Yes, the Son of God came into the world and the world rejected him. And yet, the cross is the icon of perfect love. There is no better symbol out there of what perfect love looks like. By his wounds, we are healed! The truth is: the sermon on the plain in Luke's Gospel together with the icon of the cross paradoxically offer us a roadmap to joy, real joy, authentic joy, which will help us grow closer to Jesus who alone can give us the grace to rise above whatever challenge this world can throw at us...even if it is a foot of snow.