

Laughing With a Silver Tongue

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Jesus is deeply concerned with the well-being of all people. Contrary to how we so often think today of well-being as a personal, individual responsibility, Jesus casts it as a mutual responsibility. Those with more than they need and capacity to help are expected to share their excess and ability with those in need. The kingdom of God is a place where all flourish because of their loving cooperation, not some at the expense of others.

GOD BESIDE ME

The scene in today's gospel passage begins with Jesus and the disciples descending to a level place. They are returning from a time of deep prayer and conversation up a mountain, at the end of which, Jesus has named twelve of his disciples to be apostles. These two terms are often heard as synonyms, but are not quite the same thing. A disciple, technically, is a student. Today we might use the terms follower or devotee to describe someone who closely follows the pattern and teaching of another. Describing someone as a disciple of Rowan Williams or Tom Wright gives us a sense of where some of their theological convictions might lie. Jesus has many disciples, far more than the twelve named as apostles. An apostle is, literally, one who is sent. An epistle is a thing that is sent, usually meaning a letter. Apostles are people who are sent. These twelve are the ones that Jesus has chosen from among the crowd of disciples to carry his message and teaching into the world. They will share the good news and baptize new disciples, though this commission hasn't been explicitly shared yet.

When Jesus and his disciples descend to the plain below their mountain retreat, a great crowd is present. Some are there to hear what Jesus has to say, others are seeking healing, and surely still others are there to capitalize on opportunity. Where there is a crowd, there is someone selling food, drink, and the first-century version of a concert tee. This event begins with a demonstration of Jesus's status as a conduit for divine healing power. People are trying to touch him—just as the woman with the haemorrhage will¹—because those who manage to make contact are healed. It is important

¹Luke 8:43–48

that this scene begins with tangible signs of God's presence in the world, in the lives of those present.

GATHERED INTO ONE GREAT FAMILY

Jesus begins his sermon by looking at his disciples. He is speaking to them, though many who are curious or just following the crowd will also hear what he has to say. Jesus, addressing his disciples, announces blessing upon those who are poor, those who are hungry, and those who weep. Not those in the world who live in these states, but those among his disciples. "You who are hungry now," is a powerful and pointed address.²

Most of the people living in this place and time are people who we, today, would categorize as poor. They do not know what the future holds, how crops will fare, and very few have the kind of social safety nets that we have considered normative in Western societies for the last century or so. Jesus's promises of blessings in the kingdom of God may seem like cold comfort. If someone is hungry now, what does the promise of being fed at the Last Day do for them? This is why beginning with healing acts is so important. There is evidence in the crowd, at this moment, that God's promises are being fulfilled. These reminders of God's fairness and sense of justice are powerful for those who live in need created by human injustice. Especially when they can see and feel God at work in their midst. These reminders are also powerful for those who are not in need.

Interestingly, many of Jesus's apostles fall into this latter category. At least four of them own boats, one is a tax collector, and several are men with households. They have been able to leave

their families and businesses behind and, presumably, their absence has not been deleterious. I think we can safely assume that Jesus would not call someone to radical abandonment of their previous life if it meant that their household would be plunged into poverty and hunger.

Jesus's description of God's justice when it comes to material things is harsh.³ Woe to the rich because they already have all of the consolation that they will receive. If money, property, and things have been the focus of one's life, then they will be one's consolation in death. This puts a particular light on the familiar phrase, "You can't take it with you." There is no mention here that the rich will be particularly tormented in the kingdom of God, only that the places where they have put their energy and work in this life will not avail them much consolation on the other side of death.

Jesus is deeply concerned with the material well-being of people, but especially with how that plays out in relationship. In Jesus's teaching there is a consistent responsibility on the part of the rich to share their excess with those in need. "The poor" are not a fixed group. Anyone might become poor through a series of misfortunes, just as anyone might become wealthy with a bit of luck. Jesus's descriptions of these economic states are the opposite of how we so often hear them told today. So often we hear that people who are poor or homeless or hungry are in that position because they made poor choices. Poverty is described as the result of an individual moral failing and, therefore, is viewed as an individual responsibility to improve. Any sort of social aid is seen as the greatest of generosity and certainly not deserved.

We know, in fact, that this is not the case. The

²Luke 6:21

³Luke 6:24

economics of living in Canada have become increasingly difficult over the last half-century. The last five years have seen some of the most dramatic increases in costs in living memory while wages and other supports have increased very little. It is not that there is a lack of resources. There is more than enough food and wealth in this country to house and feed every person who lives here. Rather, we are witnessing the disintegration of the kind of relationships founded on mutual care and responsibility that Jesus teaches are so important for the flourishing of human life.

LAUGHING WITH A SILVER TONGUE

Jesus's condemnation of laughter, similarly, is not about laughing and humour in general. We know that Jesus was charismatic and popular and attended many dinners and celebrations. Surely, he laughed much. The key here is not so much the specific behaviour, but how it is exercised in relationship. One who laughs at a funny tale does not need to despair. One who laughs in self-satisfaction because they are warm and well-fed while their neighbour is cold and hungry ought to be worried. Those who laugh at the misery of others, especially when they have the ability to relieve that misery, are the ones to whom Jesus speaks here. The tax collector who is proud of his lavish home while those he extorted go without food is the one who needs to watch his laughing.

Jesus shares a persistent concern for the growth of wealth by the exploitation of others. This is usually accomplished by convincing ourselves that the other is less human than we are. We don't like to put it in those terms, but it is the calculus that we perform. And, over the last few centuries, we have made

wealth-by-dehumanizing-exploitation a world-wide project. Sweatshops, slave labour, wage theft, precarious housing, all of the economic ills of our present age are possible because we have agreed that some people are worth less than others.

Related to this, is Jesus's warning to those who have a good reputation amongst everyone. He compares this status to false prophets of the past; those who claimed to speak with messages from God but led people astray. There seem to be two ways that a universal good reputation could be a bad thing. In the first way, it means that the well-regarded one is propping up an unjust status quo. In this case, a good reputation with "everyone" means, of course, those with a voice who can share their thoughts. The opinion of the voiceless is not heard, though they may think differently about one who is comfortable with injustice. In the second way, it means that the well-regarded one stands for absolutely nothing, but does so in an especially charming and pleasing way. Smoke, mirrors, and the too-common word salad get approving nods and polite applause but evaporate like morning dew when put under any scrutiny.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Jesus expects his disciples to speak truth and to stand for God's justice, even when they do not align with the values and ambitions of worldly powers. This is no small task. Jesus himself demonstrates in graphic detail what happens to those who challenge the powers of the world and call out injustice. We have, in today's gospel passage, an image of the kind of relationship we are meant to share with our neighbour, the kind of responsibility that we share for one another's care and flourishing. We have, also, a

reminder of our commitment as people who have been baptized into the Body of Christ to be the signs in the world of God's healing. Just as Jesus healed the sick in the crowd before reminding them that God's justice will come in its own time, we are called to be reminders of hope and love in word and action.

This is a significant calling. And one that feels more challenging every single day. It can be difficult and not every day feels like a victory, or even progress. The good news is that God is already at this work, calling us alongside and caring for us when it seems too much. Sometimes we are the rich, sometimes we are the poor. In both states, God is with us, in our midst, calling us to the place where we belong. Thanks be to God.