

Another Way

Perhaps you heard the sad and tragic news about former Miss USA Cheslie Kryst.

A woman who was as smart as she was physically beautiful.

A lawyer who dedicated herself to seeking social justice.

A celebrity who starred on one of the most watched TV gossip shows.

She leapt off of a 30 story building to her death a couple of weeks ago.

Before her death, she wrote "about overcoming the crushing expectations she once placed on herself after 'nearly working myself to death.

'I discovered that the world's most important question, especially when asked repeatedly and answered frankly, is: 'why?'

'Why work so hard to capture the dreams I've been taught by society to want — when I continue to only find emptiness?'" NY Post, 1/31/22, modified.

I don't pretend to know what final despair led this beautiful, talented, driven young woman to take her own life.

But her musings about the values of the world, and how those values are, in the end, an empty mirage, are worthy of reflection.

It's the question Jesus takes up as he sits with his disciples, speaking to them "on the level" – a reference not only to the ground around them, but to the truth of what he's saying.

He levels with them about what brings blessings and what brings woes in this life.

He does so by flipping our usual narrative that says the rich are in good shape, while the poor are cursed by God.

According to Jesus, the opposite is true.

Verna Dozier says that:

"The cross is not only symbol; it's the sign of the collision of the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world."

The cross is what happens when the world's values collide with kingdom values.

The world, as if on auto-pilot, immediately responds with violence, anger and death.

And that's the collision that Jesus puts in motion this morning as he upends what we all believe to be true and right and proper.

Of course the rich are blessed by God!

Of course financial success is the primary goal of life!

And of course, those who won't, can't, don't "make it" in this dog eat dog world only have themselves to blame.

Why else do 9 out of 10 people think that the quote: "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible?

But that's not the Bible.

It's Ben Franklin.

Jesus offers another way.

Because while we're often used to Jesus sitting with the down and out, today's lesson isn't directed to such folks.

It's actually directed at the self-sufficient.

The well off.

To folks like me and to folks like many of you.

To we who have made our way in this world.

Who know how to play the game.

And who usually come out on top.

We know that's the case because it's Luke's gospel that we hear from today.

Luke's community, his early comrades in following Jesus, were, the scholars tell us, made up mostly of wealthy people.

Luke was a doctor.

And at the beginning of his gospel, he's writing to the "most exalted Theophilus, so that you may recognize the reliability of the accounts you have been taught."

That's why, after teaching and healing the vast crowd that came out to see him, "then he looked up at his **disciples** and says:

'Blessed are you...'"

He's not talking to the crowds, but to his closest followers.

He's talking to exalted Theophilus.

He's talking to us.

In this disturbing litany of blessings and woes, Jesus is not only interested in reversing who and what we usually think of as blessed and cursed, he is cajoling us, especially we who are well off, we who tend to be on the winning side of society, to see life through the eyes of the "other."

Particularly the "other" who is in pain.

Who is just scraping by.

The "other" who, without Jesus pointing her out, we might just scurry by on the sidewalk.

Our world today seems obsessed with highlighting our differences.

Whether it's about politics, race, culture, creed or language.

But Jesus is trying to help us find common ground.

It's another reason why he gives this sermon today "on the level place."

Because there, we're all the same.

And yet, finding common ground requires self-awareness.

Self-examination.

And a willingness to let go.

Self-awareness, self-examination and a willingness to let go allows us to be mindful of that persistent tendency in human nature to see the world NOT through the eyes of one another, but through the limited gaze of our own eyes.

Eyes whose sight is too often restricted by blinders of one sort or another.

Blinders of ego, ethnicity and even ethics.

Jesus urges us to recognize that true "faith is as close to, and yet as different from, presumption, as virtue is close to, yet as different from, hypocrisy." M. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 294.

Meaning, that while faith beckons us to walk on water, presumption says to God: "Pay up!"

That while virtue is a way of living life within the flow of all that is, which is its own reward, hypocrisy is born out of my obsessions with what others might be thinking about me.

And so, when I toot my own horn, or try to set myself apart, to become a stand-alone being in a stand-alone world, I succeed only in diminishing the pure majesty of what it is to be human.

Creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

Creatures made not for isolation, but for community.

Not for self-sufficiency, but for unity.

We forget such things to our own peril, as Cheslie's death underscores.

As one fellow observed a long time ago,

"It's a most astonishing mystery to see heaven and earth married together in every human being.

The dust of the ground and an immortal spirit — clasping each other with such dear embrace and tender love.

What dear affection is found between them while breath sweetly links them." Id.

Seeing the world through the eyes of the "other" allows us to see in each other the very image of God.

And that's something that the good people of St Elizabeth's have known for a very long time.

During this year as we celebrate 120 years of ministry here in Palama, we remember the white deaconess from Ohio, who, with the help of one of the nation's richest men, Mr. Procter, came to Honolulu to open a settlement house.

A settlement house for a people who were at the time among the most despised and discriminated against.

The Chinese.

In our nation's history, they were the only nationality singled out for exclusion from this country.

And in that atmosphere of bigotry and fear, St Elizabeth's became a safe harbor where people were welcomed, honored and loved.

Given opportunities to learn a trade or skill and a new language.

And all these years later, their descendants are the pillars of our community.

Filling the ranks of business folks, teachers, preachers and more.

And today, St. Elizabeth's has opened her arms to folks from all over the world.

Such that, pre-covid and when this pandemic finally ends, we sing or speak in five different languages every Sunday, a precursor of the day when people of all languages and lands shall feast at the banquet hall of God!

We anticipate that feast in our daily food pantry and hot lunch and breakfast each week.

When the sick are given comfort.

And the lonely some companionship.

Seeing the world through the eyes of the houseless, the newly arrived immigrant, the confused, the young and old, this gift erases the lines that separate us from one another.

Creating community.

Breeding love.

And opening the gates of heaven to us.

Not once we've taken our last breath.

But now!

May we all of us continue to seek out, every day, God's astonishing kingdom!

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