

“A KINGDOM OF REVERSALS”

My good friend and colleague, Rev. Larry Kleiman, called me one day while I was serving St. Peter's UCC in Carmel, Indiana, and said “There is this workshop in Orlando that looks interesting. William Sloane Coffin and Henri Nouwen were the keynote speakers. And what the heck, Florida in January can't be all bad.” So I signed up. I had several books of Coffin's, but I didn't know much about Henri Nouwen. I had read one of his books in seminary, and it was a good book. But to be honest I was thinking about four days with my very good friend in Florida in January, at the church's expense. Of course I didn't share these sentiments with the church council. I told the church council: “I think this will be an opportunity for me to enrich my own spiritual growth, and of course that will benefit the congregation as well.” OK, so sainthood is out of the question.

What I did not know when I was making my plans was how my life would be changed by this experience. Coffin was first, and his words were inspiring. He is a wonderful preacher and teacher; his impact on me has been great. But Henri Nouwen changed my life. He began his first presentation with this passage from Luke. He first did a little bible study. Matthew has the famous “Sermon on the Mount.” This passage we read this morning is known as “The Sermon on the Plain.” Matthew and Luke differ in their interpretation of this material. Matthew writes, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” Luke writes, “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*” There is a big difference between those two statements. *Blessed are the poor in spirit* allows for lots of latitude. Anyone can be poor in spirit. But Luke's language is quite clear: “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*”

Nouwen then asked the 500 or so UCC clergy in attendance, “How many of you spend any time with the poor?” Not many hands went up. Certainly not mine. At that point in my life I had literally no contact with the poor. I had grown up in an affluent suburb of Chicago, and at the time I was serving a church in the most affluent community in the state of Indiana. He then went on to tell his own story of leaving the ivy covered walls of Harvard University, and all the success he had achieved as an author and teacher. He moved into a community of profoundly disabled adults, doing the mundane tasks of feeding, bathing, and most of all loving these special needs people. He lived in this community until his death several years ago. He discovered the blessing of the poor in a way that forever changed his life. He then challenged those of us in that auditorium to go home and spend time with the poor.

I have told this story in several forms over the years because it has become a formative story for my life. I have not had a born again experience, like I have heard others describe, but this was a moment in time that I can vividly remember, and my life has been very different since. My life has been dramatically changed since I went back to Indianapolis and began spending several hours a week volunteering in a homeless shelter. It led me to what I expect to be a lifetime of working for and with the poor. Since that fateful day in Orlando 20 years ago I have helped to open 16 Family Promise affiliates in 7 states. Over that period of time hundreds if not thousands of homeless families have been given a hand up, not just a hand out.

Yet in spite of my commitment and energy to working with homeless families, I still struggle with this passage in Luke. “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of heaven.*” It is a nice thought that those who do not have now will have later, but where Jesus goes from there is troubling. “*But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.*” Many of you are in the same dilemma as I am. Where would you place yourself in this scenario? It was a little easier for me to read this passage when I was living in Laingsburg. After four years of college and three years of seminary, I went to work for less than \$20,000 a year including benefits and expenses. I did not go into ministry to make a lot of money, but I never imagined I would be so comfortable.

Jesus here blesses those whom the world often curses, people like the poor, the unemployed, the dispossessed and the oppressed. Blessed are you hungry people; you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you who are hated by others because of your loyalty to Jesus. In the kingdoms where we live, such people get in the way of the enjoyment of our successes. The kingdom Jesus preaches is a kingdom of reversals. After blessing those whom we would curse, the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful---Jesus curses those whom we bless, the rich, the content, the happy. Toward the end of every year there are lists like "Ten Most Influential People of the Year." I can tell you, there is never a poor, sorrowful, or hungry one among them. They are almost always people of vast wealth, power, and prestige.

To those people Jesus says, "You have already received your consolation. You have had the best that this world has to offer. God has very little to give the person who already has everything, so now you, who have had so much, get nothing. You were good at working the kingdoms of this world to your advantage. Now in God's kingdom you shall be cursed." Is this good news or bad news? It all depends on where you are sitting when you hear them. If you are rich, content, happy then this passage has some tough things to say about your future. It's not so much that God punishes people who are rich. According to Jesus it is that God's kingdom values certain lifestyles and not others. God's kingdom appears to be prejudiced toward certain sorts of people and not others. Jesus does not tell anyone in this sermon to go out and do anything. He simply announces the way things are in the kingdom of God.

Like we do with all scripture we are left to determine what this means to us. Who is rich? Is it only the top tax bracket or is it most of us in a congregation like this one? Brendan asked me yesterday what income was considered middle class. 50, 60, 70 thousand dollars a year? More? It used to be rare to be a millionaire and now it is very common in this country. There is a commercial for ING where people carry around a big number that represents their net wealth and most of them are very big numbers. One fact is that the standard of living in this country is very high compared to much of the world. Jesus spends a great deal of energy talking about money and what we do with it because it is a great corrupter. Ask college graduates what is most important about the job they will pursue and it is usually money. Who is rich?

I remember an interview, but not the name of the televangelist. Something like the Rev. Billy-Joe-Jim-Bob was taking viewers on a tour of his 16 million dollar private jet, paid for by the generous donations of his fleeced flock. Of course he needed the plane to evangelize the poor heathen in far away places. As he described the mahogany inlaid trim, and the plush leather seating, he preached the gospel of success. He claimed that wealth was the direct blessing of God for the righteous. You can imagine how popular this message is, particularly with those who are well off. I doubt anyone who is poor would feel too good about the connection between success and faithfulness.

There is a whole movement of this gospel in California. "God wants you to be rich," is the common theme. At least they are being honest about the god they worship. The rest of us pay lip service to this God of Jesus, but our lives belie a different truth. The television ministries which preach the gospel of success are self-fulfilling prophecies. They attract people with money who then make it possible to succeed. Just recently one of the big churches announced an \$800,000 deficit. That is four times our budget. Two days later they announced they had raised 1.5 million. Those are some deep pockets.

Jesus didn't seem interested in attracting the well healed to his movement. I am sure that his message would have angered those with wealth and power. I am also sure that those same folks did not appreciate his preaching to crowds of peasants that the future kingdom would be theirs. We live in a democracy (technically we are a Republic) where theoretically anyone can be elected to public office. It might just be coincidence that we recently had two presidents from the same immediate family and another was the governor of Florida. This is not a republican phenomenon. If Ted Kennedy's son does not run for his seat in the next election it will be the first time a Kennedy has not been in office for decades. Wealth and power go hand in hand.

This message of Jesus was and is deeply subversive. Trickle down economics is safe because the power stays at the top. Jesus is preaching the overthrow of the kingdoms of this world in favor of God's kingdom. He was nailed to the cross for it. Parker Palmer in *The Promise of Paradox* writes, "...the cross signifies that pain stops here. The way of the cross is a way of absorbing pain, not passing it on; a way which transforms pain from destructive impulse into creative power. When Jesus accepted the cross, his death became a channel for

the redeeming power of love. When we accept the crosses and contradictions of our lives, we allow that same power to flow. When we give our hearts to the world, our hearts will be broken. But they are broken open to become channels for a love greater than our own. Only as pain is transformed by love will the real revolution come, the revolution which promises to take us toward the peaceable kingdom.”

I had a terrible time concluding this sermon. You need to conclude it for yourself. I can only invite you, as Henri Nouwen invited me, to experience that creative power in a new way. The problems seem so overwhelming, so insoluble, that it becomes easy just to ignore them. This would have been an easy passage to have avoided. The truth is hard, but maybe the truth will set us free.