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The 6th Sunday after the Epiphany

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In the depth and complexity of the human condition, we encounter Jesus today, out on the plain where crowds have come — to be healed and to hear him. Certainly, there was something about Jesus that set him apart. Perhaps it was the confidence and authority with which he spoke, or the compassion he displayed as he touched the untouchable, as he looked into the eyes of the unseen. Maybe, like a charismatic political candidate or a motivational speaker telling their story of struggle and transformation, Jesus' presence inspired and energized the crowd, so much that they dared to hope to be healed.

Luke tells how power came out of Jesus, "a power that healed them all." Jesus has just come from praying on the mountain, a place of closeness to God. And it is prayer that guides his next steps, and all he will say and do. Power flowed from Jesus, and not just any power, but the power of God. And that power was about healing and restoring those who had come for help.

In Jesus' words we hear echoes of his mother's song: how the humble and meek will be exalted, the hungry filled with good things, the proud scattered in their conceit and the rich sent away empty. In his words we hear the voice of Isaiah when he tells that every valley shall be raised up, and every mountain made low. These intentions of God will be fulfilled, bringing the promised healing and freedom from whatever it is that holds us captive. In Jesus' words, we are reminded that the world is shaped by God, and not by us.

Jesus' speech in this sermon on the plain is quite direct — with a whole lotta you and yours, for both the beatitudes and the woes. Those who are blessed, and those warned by woes find that their circumstances will be reversed. Poor and rich, hungry and filled, weeping and laughing, hated and admired — All will be flipped on its head. What is it that makes this gospel so hard-hitting?

Perhaps it is that God's good news to the poor is also tough news for those who are not poor. Perhaps it is the truth that for God's reign to be good news for the well-fed, the rich, laughing and admired, they will have to wake up and change their ways. If we feel the sharp edges of Jesus' words, it is an invitation into self-examination, and to seek where and how we may live with attention and generosity toward our neighbors, just as God is attentive and generous with us.

We may have an understanding what it is to be poor, but poverty is subjective. What one person may consider to be riches, and the lack thereof as a state of poverty, may not relate in any way to another person's definition of wealth. Although there is a cultural association of wealth with happiness and life satisfaction, yet these — happiness and life satisfaction are more often associated with a richness of spirit and relationships than material wealth.

It would be safe to assume that Jesus is not talking to people who possess great material wealth, these are rarely the people who gather in crowds at the foot of a mountain to listen to an itinerant preacher. However, Jesus' audience is blessed with a hunger to learn more, to discover all that Jesus can teach them about God, faith, and heavenly rewards. It may also be that people who can afford to pay to

achieve their needs, wants, and desires now may not be not likely to realize their need for God, whereas those who are in need, often display the openness and the capacity to receive the wealth, consolation and the deeply satisfying relationships offered through God's realm.

Although Jesus speaks to the human conditions of poverty, hunger, sorrow and esteem, his focus is less on the diseases he has already cured, and more on "ways of being". With every word Jesus challenges his disciples, and us, to look within, to examine our own lives and to consider what in his words resonates with or confronts us. We are invited to consider how we feel about them, to notice what emotions arise. In doing this, we may discover that we have a particular view or understanding about, for example, poverty. We naturally bring our own perspective, and as is always the case with Jesus, we are invited to wonder, to explore, to look to see if there is something for us to learn, if there is something we are missing.

I'd like to share with you a time when my understanding of poverty was confronted:

In 2015, I traveled to El Salvador to participate in a week-long course on Human Rights, and was eager to explore the topic with my classmates and those from local organizations. On our second day, we were invited to walk up the mountainside, near the coffee plantation, to visit with one of the church families. As we turned the corner, our hosts met us at the roadside, and then turned to lead us down a wooded path. Tucked in below was a makeshift home of cardboard, corrugated metal and some wood randomly tied together. There was no running water or electricity.

Almost immediately a wave of emotions overtook me. I was shocked by the conditions in which this family was living and felt sorry for them; I felt anger at the disparity between their lived experience and my own; and I wrestled with a profound sense of shame as I stood there boldly examining their life, as if they were on display like an exhibit at a museum. The discomfort was almost more than I could bear. I felt I had intruded and if I am honest, I wanted to get away.

Yet, with graciousness and generosity, they invited us to come in, and to hear their story. And as I listened, something in me shifted. Slowly, I began to notice not the differences between us, but the similarities that we shared as human beings. Slowly, I began to relate to them — how they got up and went to work, how their daughter went to school, how grandma prepared the meals, and how they found strength from within their base community.

Perhaps the most profound memory I hold is the moment when the woman, Maria, emerged from one of the rooms with a plate of fresh mangoes, offering one to each of us. I was so deeply moved by her generosity and hospitality, as I suddenly became aware that I was far poorer in spirit than she.

Our views of the world, and our interpretations of what it means to be poor, or rich, hungry or full are subjective. To some, poverty may look like this family in El Salvador, while for others, it may look like 10 people living in a single one-room apartment as they combine their part time wages to pay the rent. Some of us may recognize hunger, and weeping, as expressions of poverty. We may see the person begging on the side of the road and think, that is what it is to be poor.

We who are fortunate enough to have our basic physical and safety needs met may struggle to comprehend the pitfalls of having too much. We may not easily see that having more wealth, space, food or things than we need can be a burden, sometimes with unhealthy consequences. As we sit with the discomfort found in the gap between those who have more than enough and those who do not have enough, we are invited to linger in the in-between space— a space where ideally “enough” is sufficient, or as Peter has often said to me, “Enough is as good as a feast!” We must ask ourselves, what for us is enough?

Inside of your bulletin you’ll find a colorful handout. Some of you may be familiar with the American Psychologist Abraham Maslow, and his psychological model shown here. While we are not delving into a therapy session, I felt this tool might give assist us as we consider our own needs, and those of others.

There are 5 levels —Beginning with the RED bar, Maslow identifies our most basic needs: Food, water, air, shelter, clothing and sleep — the things that are so necessary that if one of them is missing, we may not be able to function.

Moving up to the ORANGE bar, he moves us into our Safety Needs. These are the things that help us to know we are safe, we are ok: enough money to live, good health, security — meaning, living somewhere where we know we are safe, or in circumstances that do not harm us. With the RED bar, these combine as our foundational Basic Needs.

Stepping up to the YELLOW bar- we find what Maslow identifies as our Psychological Needs. These are our needs for love and belonging. Such need for love can be intimate and romantic, or platonic and based in friendship, about connection and relationship. When we can give and receive love, we know that we have belonging. And if any of our basic needs are compromised, we may not be able to love or allow ourselves to be loved.

Moving up one more bar to the GREEN and we find Esteem — our deep need for recognition, acknowledgment, that what we give and do makes a difference, and others know this. Our sense of confidence and strength arises out of esteem.

Last, the top of the triangle is the BLUE Bar, which is self-fulfillment, and the premise is that when all of our other needs are met, we are poised to step out into the world to become who we are called to be — to dare to be who God has called us to be.



I'd like you to join me in a short theological reflection. Using the triangle as a tool, in Silence and considering just for yourself, as you think about Jesus' words in the beatitudes, and about your own needs, ponder the triangle.

Take a moment to notice where you find yourself. Today, or at a time in the past. Thinking about your loved ones, your neighbors, where might they be, and where do you sit in relationship to them — are they where you are? Or above or below?

Last, I invite you to consider how God is at work in your life, and where you might be called to reach up, so that someone can extend a hand to you, or where you might reach down to extend your hand to someone else. Or might you simply need to reach across the aisle?

Jesus has come to flip the world on its head, to make what is broken whole, and to break down the barriers that keep us from God, that have us convinced that we don't need God, that we can do this all on our own. Sometimes, when we are comfortable, we forget our need for God. But Jesus is the great equalizer who has come to dispel that myth — and in doing so, to help us become aware of our own hunger, of the poverty that can plague our heart and soul.

Sometimes it is by simply being aware that our eyes and hearts become open, that our perspectives begin to change. Between the blessings and the woes, there is a gap — it is the gap Jesus calls us to address, for God's sake and for our own. It's what we as children of God do, and what we repent of not having done, that has the power to transform the world. May it be so.