

The word “emergency” is defined by Oxford dictionaries as “A serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation requiring immediate action.” It is a noun, such as in “Running out of coffee during the polar vortex was the worst emergency the van Alstynes had faced for some time,” but it can also be a modifier, as in “My beagle thinks that running out of peanut butter is an emergency situation,” or shorthand for the ER, as in “I never cook for the parish, because I don’t want any of my parishioners to end up in Emergency.” The word comes from the Latin word *emergere*, which means not panic nor predicament nor party politics, but arise, or, to bring to light. An emergency is that which emerges, which is brought into light. Somehow along the years the word took on the assumption that whatever it was that emerged made you say, “Oh shoot!” or worse, but the origin still holds that meaning of something to be revealed, something suddenly seen in the light. Seems an appropriate word for us to consider here in these last days after the Feast of the Epiphany.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has gathered together all of the people who have come to him for enlightenment and healing, along with his fresh-faced, newly-minted disciples, for a speech. We’re far more familiar with Matthew’s version of this speech; we call it the Sermon on the Mount, and you have likely memorized large portions of it. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” “Let your light shine before others.” “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” And on and on. But here in Luke, the sermon is much shorter, and not nearly as oft-memorized. It is also not a Sermon on a Mount. Here the mountain has been made low, and Jesus’ sermon is on a level place, the Sermon on the Plain.

The Sermon on the Plain is less soul-soothing and quotable than its mountain cousin. This is especially true when it comes to the Beatitudes. The Matthean version of the Beatitudes dominates in the church and in the world. It’s the Matthean version that we hear on

All Saints Day, the Matthean version many people choose for the weddings, the Matthean version that appears on cross stitch samplers and inspirational calendars and internet memes, the Matthean version that was set by composer Arvo Pärt that we'll hear at Communion. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. If Matthew's Sermon on the Mount lifts us high into the clouds; Luke's Sermon on the Plain brings us firmly back down to earth. Not blessed are the poor in spirit, but blessed are you who are poor. Not blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, but blessed are you who are hungry. Now. Luke's Sermon is about real people who are really suffering right in front of Jesus' own eyes – blessed are you who poor, hungry, mourning, and hated. Blessed are you, right here, right now, you who suffer not just in spirit but also in body.

But if we are going to be honest about this particular scene,

as intense as it is, we would have to say that Jesus' words about the poor and the hungry and those who weep do not constitute an emergency, either in the original or in the modern sense. Jesus is not shedding light on the fact that there are poor people in the crowd – these people who have traveled from Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon know that there are poor and hungry people among them; there are always poor and hungry people among them. The situation could be serious, even dangerous, for these people, but it is not new and it is not unexpected. Neither are Jesus' words of consolation an emergency, at least they shouldn't be. People had gotten a wrong-headed idea that the only way to be blessed was to be wealthy, but does not all of scripture, all of law, point to the fact that God has a preference for the poor, that God sees and cares for the hungry and wants others to do the same? Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. This is not a statement of emergency.

What does come to light in this Sermon is what emerges when Jesus begins to turn the Beatitudes around. Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich now. Woe to you who are filled, who have everything you need, who are fat and happy, who have a million followers on Instagram and multiple millions in your IRA's, whose kids are getting in to all the right schools, whose beagles are getting in to all the right doggy daycares. Woe to you who seem to have it all. This is a something new coming to light; this is a serious and unexpected situation that requires immediate action.

Jesus knows that the rich are in a far greater state of emergency than the poor. Why? Because it is so much easier for the rich to lie to themselves, to be deceived. It is so much easier for them to imagine that their happiness, their life, is built upon the fact that they can save themselves; they own enough to make it on their own. They imagine - we imagine - that they don't need God's blessing, because we can easily bless ourselves. If people like me at work, that's because of my

charm and savvy. If my presentation wins a new client, that's because I'm talented. If I have enough to keep my children warm at night, my husband flush with coffee and my beagle flush with peanut butter, well, that must be because I've done something right, right?

This is an emergency. This is a serious situation, one that is likely unexpected by those who can call themselves rich, and it is a situation that calls for drastic measures. Because this state of being will inevitably cut us off from God and from each other. If we imagine that we can save ourselves, then there is no need for prayer, no need for repentance, no need for a Body broken and given for us. And if we have no need for Communion, then we have no need for each other, no need to give aid or comfort, no need to work at loving our neighbors. Worse, if we think that we can bless ourselves, then our neighbors who struggle, who are living in poverty or who might have to flee their homes or their homelands because they cannot be anything but poor and hungry and hated there, can start to look like

they're doing something wrong. If we can bless ourselves, why can't they? You see the trouble we can get into. Thinking that we can bless ourselves leads only to barriers to Grace and walls between each other. This is an emergency that calls for conversion.

Those of us who are rich, who, by the world's standards, are most of us in this room, have to work at remembering that we are nothing and no one on our own. We have to work at remembering that everything we have is Grace, that everything we have is gift. The poor have little trouble with this. They know that they cannot make it on their own. They know, in the words of today's collect, that "in [their] weakness [they] can do nothing good without God." They know that they need their God and their neighbors, to help them stand. It is the rich who suffer from the wrong-headed idea that we have somehow made ourselves and that we can sustain ourselves. The poor have this to teach us - that we rise and sleep, walk and run, eat and drink, weep and laugh, all by the magnificent Grace of God.

The best description of this Grace I ever heard was by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He was giving a lecture at Virginia Seminary, and as talked he got so excited that he had to veer away from the appointed topic for a moment to share his thoughts about Grace. Imagine, he said, his whole body quivering with excitement, imagine that right now, you are held in the palm of God's hand. You are, you are! You are held, right here, and God is blowing God's breath into you, just like this! (blow) God is breathing every breath into you. If he were to stop for one moment, poof! We would simply disappear. But he does not stop. He just keeps (blowing). Wonderful!

When we forget this truth, when we forget the joy of this magnificent truth, this is a true state of emergency. Because if we forget that we can do nothing good without God, then we also forget the extraordinary good that God can do through us. We forget the remarkable acts of selflessness, the courageous acts of self-giving, the acts of true, earthy, Sermon on the Plain kind of love that God can

do with us. With God, we are remarkable, powerful, beautiful, holy people, who care for our neighbors as ourselves, who work to end poverty for all people, who work endlessly for an end to violence, who comfort those who mourn and feed those who are hungry, who stand with those who are hated and excluded, reviled, and defamed. With this magnificent Grace, God can help us reveal the depths of the Kingdom to all people; we can shine a light in the darkness and help that Kingdom emerge, now. Blessed are you who know this Grace now, for while without it you are nothing, with it, you can change the state of the whole world.

*Preached by Mother Erika Takacs*

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