

"Keeping The Playing Field Level"

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Millie had Alzheimer's. Jim and Millie struggled at home for a time in the early stages until it became clear that she need special care. Jim found the right place that was reasonably close that became Millie's home. Becoming Millie's "caregiver" became Jim's central reason to live. He visited her twice, even three times a day. He dropped out of everything, including church, for four months had not taken a chance to get away, to break out of the daily routine of caring for Millie that had become the center of his life, to find a "new normal." Son had been worrying about all this and when he learned of the death of Jim's best friend and co-worker around the church and thought that this might be opportunity to help him make that transition.

He called Jim up and said, "Dad, if you want to go to this funeral, I'll go with you." He told him that he thought it would be good for him. Jim agreed. And so they met at church on the day of the funeral.

The experience was everything they hoped that it would be. The service was a wonderful, tender tribute to this faithful servant of the Gospel, this saint of the Church. There was sadness, of course, but also a beautiful celebration of his life. You lost count of the old friends who came up to his father, saying how good it was to see him and how much it meant that he had come back for this tribute. The highlight was the reception following the funeral when the minister came up and sat down for half an hour to talk to Dad and regale him with stories and memories that people had shared with her of Dad's service and ministry over the years. In the parking lot, preparing to go our separate ways, Dad said to his son, "You don't have to worry so much about me. I know that I'm going every day to the care center to see your Mom. I know this is becoming my routine, but it's okay. I've been married to your mother for sixty years. This terrible disease has taken her away from me. Of course, I'm sad. Be patient with me. Give me time. I deserve to weep. I've earned the right!"

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." I want to talk to Jesus and say, "That sounds great, but when? When will Jim laugh again?" Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" might be titled "Sermon on A Level Playing Field". It begins the same way the Gospel of Luke as a whole begins, by painting a picture of a world turned upside down. At the start of his ministry, when he read from Isaiah in his hometown synagogue, Jesus promised that the poor would receive good news, the captives would be released, and that the blind would see. The crowd in the synagogue turned pretty ugly that day. But there on the plain, this is a different day and a different crowd. The great multitude gathered around him are exactly the kind of people Jesus came to proclaim favored by God. And here is Jesus, not high on some mountain talking down to them, as he does in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, but he is right there among them and in the midst of them.

As a matter of fact, he might even be below them. The one detail in this passage that has always intrigued me is that even as he is busy healing the crowd's diseases, Jesus literally has to "look up" to see his disciples before he can teach them. Are they somehow above him? Have they removed themselves from the seething mass of suffering? Is this why Jesus has to make sure that they really take notice of these poor, sad, discarded folk? "Don't you realize these are the blessed of God," he seems to say, "This is where we should focus our attention because it is these people who have God's attention. God sees them even when no one else does."

To be blessed, after all, is to know that you have God's attention. To know that whenever you go, you will not be alone. To be blessed is to know that you are valued and important simply because God has made you priceless. And suddenly the separation between the disciples and the crowd is removed. Everyone is connected because the only possession anyone really has is the blessing of God. Now let's be clear. In Luke, Jesus is blessing the real poor, hungry, grief-stricken, and outcasts of this world, not the "poor in spirit" as in the Gospel of Matthew. In Luke, Jesus is also clear that wealth and privilege are real dangers that have the power to separate one from God and from the human community. Jesus spells

out the "woes" of which the comfortable and wealthy better beware. The kingdom of God belongs to those who have nothing except God. There seems to be two categories here, distinct and separate, and it's natural to ask, "Which group am I a part of?"

Maybe if we spent less time celebrating our victories and priding ourselves on our position, we might know more of God's blessing. Maybe if we were more honest about our own brokenness, we would know how close we are to one another and how much we need one another.

After all, we are all broken. Some of us have lost health or lost relationships or lost jobs. Our brokenness is personal, it's unique, it's truly ours, it's no one else's. And yet it connects us with one another because we are all broken in some way.

We look around, we see injustice, we see exploitation, we see violence, and the faithful cannot help but mourn. I think that includes all of us, no matter who we voted for, no matter our economic status, our sexual orientation, or our ethnic background, we are all mourning. We hear of borders closed and walls being built and we know, we know this is not how God works. We hear of racism and our brothers and sisters living in fear, and we mourn. We listen to vitriolic words coming to us from all sides, and we wonder where is our comfort to come from?

Well, here's the good news. Blessed are those who weep. God hears you. God knows you. God comes close to you. And God will not let you go. We all deserve to weep, but we are all blessed. We are not alone.

We worship a God who was not content to look down upon us from some safe haven, light years away. We follow a savior who gets down, right down on the same plain with those in the deepest pain, with those who have nothing left.

He looks up, at us, his disciples, and invites us to join him there. He reminds us that this is where God is looking. And by the way, we are not so different. We are broken, too. We yearn for a world turned upside down.

We all deserve to weep. It helps to keep our emotional and spiritual playing field level, clears the tears that need to be shed from our eyes and we begin to see and have faith and follow. And we all are blessed. This is the word of The Lord.