

Epiphany 6C: Luke 6:17-26
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Assaulted by Reality

It's significant that the Church begins each year with the season of Epiphany. For calling this time "Epiphany," literally manifestation or revelation, is a good way for us to be reminded that Christianity is a "revealed religion." By that, I mean that Christianity is not something natural, that we can extrapolate from life. You can't come up with it from long walks in the woods or ruminating in your thoughts while sitting quietly in your study. It's not something you can calculate or test or devise. It's got to be shown, revealed to you. You've got to have an epiphany, a revelation—it's got to come as a gift.

I'm sure it is the "epiphanic" quality of faith that makes the Flannery O'Connor story "Revelation" a favorite of many preachers. The story opens with Ruby Turpin sitting in a crowded doctor's waiting room. And as Ruby often did, she occupied her meager mind by going around the room, sizing up every person, one by one, measuring herself against the people who were seated before her. And as she placed herself on the social ladder, Ruby always seemed to come out a step or two above everybody else—particularly the sullen looking teenage girl seated across from her. Unkempt, pockmarked, and sour. Ruby tried to make conversation with a couple of the nicer looking people in the room before turning to the girl's mother, "Well, what is your daughter's name?" The mother looked up and said, "Mary. Her name is Mary Grace."

"Well, Mary Grace," said Ruby, "I always think it is just great to sit up in your chair, and posture is so important, and . . ." The girl glared at her. Ruby continued to chatter loud enough for everybody in the waiting room to hear. She talked about the relative value of poor black workers compared to "poor white trash," though you had to pay them a full day's wage. And you had to take them home at the end of the day even though it was no more than half a mile walk. Ruby said she knew white trash that lived in houses worse than some of "our pigs that Claude and me has got." Ruby chattered on until the unkempt teenager fixed her eyes on her, like "steely drills," making Ruby very uncomfortable.

Ruby squinted at the title of the girl's book—*Human Development*—and was imagining the lurid things in that book, when suddenly Mary Grace hurls the huge book across the waiting room, cold cocking Ruby across the forehead. Ruby sprawls in the middle of the floor. The girl jumps on top of her hissing, "Go back to hell where you belong, you old wart hog."

Believe it or not, this incident marks the beginning of Ruby's epiphany. It comes as a gift, a gift of grace, *difficult* grace. Before the story ends, Ruby is given a stunning vision of redemption, a vision of a grand parade to heaven, with white trash, freaks and lunatics leading the way ahead of the righteous, scrupulous and stainless.

In the Christian life, faith, grace, and revelation don't always arrive as some gloriously beatific vision. More often they come like a large book whopping you in the head! I can tell you in my own life, God has had to resort to using a proverbial 2x4 upside my head to get my attention!

And, as a preacher, I guess it's my divinely assigned task, having myself been personally assaulted by the gospel, to whop others in the head with a great big book!

That God has to resort to such drastic measures to get a message across to us says a lot about us, I figure, about our stubbornness and our blindness to the truth. But it also says something about the message itself, about the nature of God's truth. Namely, what is revealed to us is so different, so at odds with what we expect, that it takes a revelation, an epiphany, a book whopping us in the head, for us to get it.

Now, some Christians, not wanting to seem arrogant, downplay the idea that as Christians, we have access to any special knowledge or truth. I understand that, but what this 'theological modesty' amounts to is a fundamental denial of the faith. For at the center, the foundation of our faith is the conviction that God has spoken, revealed himself, first to Israel and then definitively in Jesus. God has disclosed to us, given us something special, unique, something that others don't have, that we bring to the conversation, an insight, an understanding into the way the world is.

Now, this is no reason for us to boast. For, it's not like we made it or have any claim on this insight. It's a gift, given to us. Moreover, the fact is, precisely because we have this special insight, we can't help but stand apart, be set apart from the rest of the world. As O'Connor said elsewhere: "you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd."

Such is the implication of today's Gospel lesson. Jesus has been traveling around the Judean countryside, stirring up excitement with his preaching and miracles. A large crowd from all over the country had come to be healed and cured of unclean spirits. And after healing them, Jesus takes the opportunity to let these poor souls in on a little secret, a secret about how the world really is, about the world as God sees it. He declares:

"Blessed are you who are destitute, for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

"Blessed are you when people hate you, on account of the Son of Man, for surely your reward is great in heaven."

Now this not what you'd call "conventional wisdom," not what his audience would have expected. The Jews of Jesus' day had grown up in a culture that saw wealth as a sign of God's blessing. If you are rich, then you must have done something right, right? Otherwise why would God bless you with wealth and prosperity? Yet here was Jesus teaching a different view of things.

According to Jesus, it's exactly the ones you'd least expect to be honored that receive God's special favor. The poor—the people we overlook, disregard, despise, and consider failures, the hungry—the people we expect must be lazy or inept or they wouldn't be asking for handouts; those who weep—the whiners and complainers who are always acting like they've had it worse than anyone else; the abrasive, or holier-than-thou, or self-righteous types—the people we tend to curse, Jesus says, are the ones who are actually blessed.

Now, according to all common sense, this is plainly laughable. I mean, let's be honest, there's nothing good or desirable about being persecuted, about being a nobody, about being sad, or utterly destitute. No one in their right mind *wants* to experience any of that. And yet here Jesus was, saying that the persecuted, the nobodies, the destitute are in fact blessed... *happy*.

But we know who are really blessed. We know what it takes to be happy: Blessed are those who climb the corporate ladder; for they will be have a comfortable retirement. Blessed are the well-educated, for they will get the good jobs. Blessed are the well-connected, for their aspirations will not go unnoticed. Now, you may not hear anyone actually come out and say such things but that's the message we get from commercials, politicians, celebrities and pretty much everyone.

But Jesus is saying these people had better look out. For those who appear to "have it all," well, what they have is all they are ever going to have. They are already living their best life now, but this is as good as it gets for them. For the conventional order we know, he says, is, well, upside down and inside out.

Ok, let's say for a moment that this is true. What then are we supposed to do about it? Make ourselves destitute? Try to get ourselves persecuted? Give up eating??? That can't be what Jesus is saying, is it?

No, his sermon isn't about that. It isn't about anything we can or should do. It's about God and about the world as God sees it. To use the terminology of high school English teachers, this sermon of Jesus' is in the "indicative" not the "imperative" voice. He's not trying to get us to *do* anything at all, but rather telling it like it is, declaring the nature of a gracious, forgiving God, a God who takes sides for the oppressed and lets the powerful and elite fall on their rear.

If there is any ethical instruction in this sermon, it is only by implication, as a response to a vision of God. What Jesus is doing here chiefly is defining, both now and in God's future, the way the world works; he is replacing conventional wisdom, common representations of the world, with a new one.

This is important to understand because the world is forever telling us Christians to "get real," to "face facts." To the world, much of what we do here seems sadly out of touch with "the real world." People say, "Well, I think believing in God is fine, but sometimes you just have to get real." Or, "You religious people need to get off your 'pie-in-the-sky' thinking and face facts."

But that begs the question, "Well, who decides what the facts are? Who defines reality?" We can only live in the world that we see. So debates about what's what in the world, about what is a fact, what is real, come down to the question, What do you see? What's going on? Who is in charge? Why are we here? Where are we heading? We Christians have particular opinions about these questions, because of Jesus.

A colleague of mine early in his ministry went to the hospital to visit a parishioner who had just given birth. The doctor came into the room to tell her and her husband that there were some problems with their baby. He'd been born with Down's Syndrome, and he also had a respiratory

condition. They could correct it, but the doctor recommended that they consider just “letting nature take its course.” The couple seemed confused. “If the condition can be corrected, then we want it corrected,” the husband said. His wife nodded in agreement. “You must understand,” the doctor said, “that studies show that parents who keep these children suffer from a high incidence of marital distress and separation. Is it fair for you to bring this sort of suffering upon your other two children?”

The mother replied, “Our children have had every advantage. They have really never known suffering, never had the opportunity to know it. I don't know if God's hand is in this or not, but I can see why it would make sense for a child like this to be born into a family like ours. Our children will all do just fine. When you think about it, raising our new son is really a great opportunity for our family.” Later the doctor entreated my colleague, “Pastor, I hope you can help them get real.” “Oh, doctor,” my colleague thought to himself, “they are real. They are living in a world more real than yours, a world defined by God.”

As Christians we know that what the world regards as “reality” is often only a shadow, a poor imitation of “the real thing.” God has shown us what the real world really looks like. That vision is not something that can be found through careful philosophical reflection but rather through God’s gracious revelation. That’s the reason we come together each week—to “get real” according to the reality God has revealed, to “re-narrate” our lives in the light of the story of Jesus.

The stories the world tells—stories derived from psychology, economics, sociology and other secular means—are too small for the truthful living of our lives. The church teaches us a new way of seeing and naming, enabling us to fit our lives into the plot of a new story, a larger story. In Jesus we have been caught up in the great drama of salvation as a whole new world has been opened, a world we would never have come up with on our own, but which is truer than anything we could have imagined. Thanks be to God!