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Epiphany 6C; Luke 6:17-26

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1990's movie *Ghost* stars Patrick Swayze as Sam, Demi Moore as his girlfriend Molly, and Whoopi Goldberg as Oda Mae, a medium who can hear the deceased, much to her surprise. The movie follows Sam as he tries, with Oda Mae's help, to cross some Ts and dot some Is after his untimely death. I know nearly all the lines. In one scene, Sam says to Molly via Oda Mae, "Molly, you're in danger." Oda Mae says, "You can't just blurt it out like that! I'm going to tell her in my own way." Oda Mae turns to Demi Moore and says, "Molly, you in danger girl."

Unlike Oda Mae, who tries to soften a difficult message, Jesus does not pull any punches today. Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, weep, hated, he says. For a someone who speaks in metaphorical stories, Jesus is now alarmingly straightforward. The listener cannot hear anything other than what he means— You that are poor, You that are hungry, You that mourn, You that are hated, Blessed. And Jesus just keep going, blurting out woes diametrically opposed to the four blessings. Woe to you who are rich, to you who are full, to you who are laughing, to you when all speak well of you.

Jesus' uncompromising words make this passage hard to hear. The woes are difficult because Middlesex County, where St. Mary's is situated, where many of us live, is in the top 1% of counties in one of the world's wealthiest countries. Though there is a range of socioeconomic status here, though life is complex—by virtue of where we are situated, many people we know and love, many people we are around every day if not we ourselves, are statistically more likely to be on the Woe side.

The blessings are hard to hear, too. Jesus says that you who are hunger will be fed NOW, you who weep will be comforted NOW and yet NOW it is painfully obvious that the world rewards those NOW who amass resources, gives some folks who already have a lot even more, including the power to pull funding from some non-profits who directly serve people in need. Jesus calls his followers to generosity and compassion and yet our systems tilt towards prizing self-sufficiency, all in the name of efficiency. The irony is enough to break your heart. If this passage is difficult to hear, we're paying attention.

But you know this passage has always been hard to take. Jesus' blessings and woes are difficult in his own time, too. In the ancient world, being blessed was associated with vitality, with longevity, with fertility, with health, with wealth, with the good life. If you were very sick, if you were born with a congenital condition, if you were hungry, if you were weeping, then you or your parents or your parents' parents had done something wrong and you deserved that consequence. If you had good fortune, then you had God's blessing. If you did not, you were not. Period.

We know exactly how disturbing Luke is because that the Bible itself tries to soften this passage, trying to do Oda Mae's version of, "Molly, you in trouble girl." Matthew's version adds more blessings, expands them to possibly include more people, and completely axes the woes.

Jesus takes a big ol' wrecking ball to generations of inherited knowledge. Jesus disassociates how things are going with divine favor. And he doesn't just pull them apart. As the dust from the wreckage clears, Jesus replaces it something unthinkably different, something that still hard today, thousands of years later— that status is not God's report card and prosperity can be a barrier.

### **Our state of being is not God's report card on us.**

Imagine or think about dealing with grief or hatred, poverty or hunger. Like me, I'm guessing you have heard— perhaps you have been— someone just torturing themselves, wondering where they went wrong, why this is happening.

The aforementioned "if-then" model, which says if you follow God you prosper, and if you don't, you won't, encourages and reinforces the "you can tell who God loves" thinking. And you know, we want to know how we are doing, generally speaking. We exist in relationship; we need responses and feedback sometimes. And yet Jesus prioritizes people who seemingly lack evidence. With the blessing, God says, "I will be with you when you need me most." Please hear me, I am NOT saying that God makes bad things happen to cozy up to us. I AM saying that it is in dire situations, be they chronic or temporary, God draws near. We don't manifest it, we don't have to feel it, we don't even have to do a good job believing it.

Jesus draws near when we are at our wit's end. That's remarkable, y'all.

The other remarkable part of this passage is less fun and also important– and that is that

**Prosperity can be a barrier.**

We view everything Jesus says is a woe as beneficial and for good reason. Education, experiences, hobbies, and more require money, often connections, require us having needs like food taken care of in order to focus on other things. I literally put down that I find God in laughter in a meeting of my own design the other day. So woe is me, yes. And while we know that mental illness, abuse, cancer, and more, can affect anyone, anywhere, if we are being honest, we also know that wealth & connections can often provide better treatment, more access to more options. Not foolproof– at all. But also often true.

The shadow side of being filled, of wealth, of being well regarded is that provides more chances to feign control, to downplay our dependence on people other than ourselves, and even on chance. Admitting need or want makes us vulnerable. And that can be terrifying, because we don't want to show our soft bellies of need to anyone at any time. We don't want to hurt.

What might come into clearer focus about ourselves or the world due to Jesus' bluntness? Would it be that own fears and insecurities, are actually holding us back from what we need most–each other? God? Someone or something that steady us in the wearing changes and chances of this life? What if we relied on God in prayer– telling God how we really feel, the good the bad the ugly? what if we opened up to one more person, just one? Would we feel the divine presence just a little more? What if we integrated this more terse Jesus into our understandings of the divine? Would we catch ourselves before calling ourselves blessed, knowing that how it's going is not God's report card on us? Might that lead our neighbors and colleagues to realize that we are trying to be more like the universally admired Jesus, less like the highly unfortunate and unfortunately understandable picture of a Christian who is only in it for their own salvation? Would more people want to learn about Jesus, not for our sake, not for the church as we know it's survival, but to address this country's epidemic of loneliness?

At the very end of *Ghost*, Sam says, “You know, it’s amazing, Molly, the love inside? You take it with you.” Thanks be to God that Jesus loves us through and through, inside, outside, sideways, all the sides. Jesus loves us enough to tell us the truth— that God’s priorities are often not the world’s priorities, that God draws near when anyone—when we— are in need.

Amen.