

One of my friends and I had a running joke. It started when, in the span of a single conversation, she made references to a number of movies and TV shows, some of which I hadn't seen. The rest, I'd never even heard of. At first, she made nothing of it, but as the conversation wore on, she became incredulous, exasperated, and resigned, and finally, my pop-culture illiteracy was so profound in her eyes that she just had to laugh. So from now on, when she's going to make a pop culture reference, she'll say, "wait, let me guess, you've never heard of it."

Now, I'd thought I was something of a pop culture buff — I guess I know a smaller number of works deeply — but none of that mattered to her. If you don't have an adequate common frame of reference, a common language or set of symbols, you can't communicate. Just like how it's hard to find something when you don't even know what it looks like. Fortunately, there is more to life than pop culture, so we could have great conversations. Ironically, my ignorance wound up deepening our friendship, not only giving us something to talk about, but giving us a new reference that was specific to our friendship. I was grateful to realize that we weren't just sharing references, but ourselves.

If having an ordinary conversation without common reference points is hard, imagine how much harder it was for Jesus to describe a profoundly new worldview, a radically expanded understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, and what that relationship could become. Now, Jesus did have the great advantage of sharing a treasure trove of knowledge and references with his primary audience: the Jewish scriptures, religion, tradition, and culture.

If we understood those things better, we'd see just how thoroughly Jesus embodied them and drew on them. Jesus was both deeply traditional and radical, proclaiming a reinterpretation of the tradition that was thoroughly faithful, yet pointedly challenging. You might say he was taking the tradition to its logical endpoint, but it was an endpoint that was not obvious, and was sometimes counterintuitive.

The prevailing take on the tradition was intuitive, but ultimately a dead end. Understanding the intricacies of the Law and the traditional interpretations and customary additions that had already grown up around the Law was very demanding. Most people were poor laborers whose lives were so consumed with toil that they could never devote the hours to scholarship that the elite could. The elite could claim to be holier than others, and could point to their wealth, comfort, and prestige as evidence that God favored them.

Now we begin to see why Jesus's message was so popular with ordinary people, and so threatening to the elite, but for his movement to succeed, Jesus needed followers who understood where he was going. He needed his disciples to have more than a common set of references, but also a common vision. He knew their potential, but he also knew that they were human. Just like us, they assumed that being prosperous, happy, and popular, finding satisfaction in this life, was a sensible goal. And

enjoyable things tend to be easy to rationalize. Can't we do more good if we have more resources? Aren't people more likely to listen to messengers who are popular and happy?

So Jesus had to turn their world upside-down. He had to turn their focus away from the comfortable world, its familiar hierarchy, and its easy answers, because he knew where that road ends. "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength," as we heard from Jeremiah. Even the best things this world can offer us are impermanent, and we seldom choose the best things.

The more prosperous we are, the less we feel the need for God. We may not actually think our comforts are an adequate substitute for God, we just tend not to look as hard for God when things are going our way. It's human nature. But a relationship with God is the most important, and the most satisfying, thing a human being can have, so anything that tempts us away from that relationship is not just a concern, but a threat of true deprivation. And, conversely, the material and emotional deprivations Jesus mentions make it easier for us to experience God's grace, the loving-kindness that God intends for all humanity to share in common.

So does that mean we should rid ourselves of our possessions, dwell in despair, and bring public vilification upon ourselves by whatever means necessary? Should we become the things that Jesus says will bless us? Does God want us to be poor, hungry, despondent, and despised? I sure hope not, since I got a little hungry while I was writing this sermon, so I shamelessly helped myself to some cheese that I'd bought to offer for company.

More seriously though, some people do have a vocation to poverty, typically in the larger context of having a vocation to monastic life. Encounters with profound sadness can make us more empathetic, and more effective in responding to the pain of others. Sometimes popular disapproval means you're doing something right. And, as the eminent biblical scholar Dr. Amy-Jill Levine wrote, "Jewish tradition regards the poor, the hungry, etc. not as cursed or impure but as deserving recipients of divine and earthly care."*

But Jesus doesn't tell us to *become* those things. Nothing in these sayings is phrased as a command, or even a request. Because he's laying out a vision, an understanding of their own tradition's values that will form the disciples for a lifetime of ministry. St. Luke tells us that the crowd surrounding Jesus and the disciples included people "from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon." That is, from all over. The setting, on a plain, full of people from near and far, symbolizes the global mission field. And it's true that serving as Jesus's apostles would make them poor, sometimes hungry, occasionally weeping, and often despised.

But I don't want to fall into a more subtle version of the very trap Jesus warned against. We gain nothing by fretting over these things, either to avoid them or to seek them out. The point is not the conditions under which we make the journey, but that we

avoid being diverted from the destination. The point is to seek the kingdom of God, rather than the approval of the world. Occasionally being happy or having a good meal or a kind word or even a few denarii to rub together aren't enough to separate us from the life and love of God. After all, God's life and love are so strong they can raise the dead.

We just have to make sure we never, ever forget that our relationship with God is what's most important in this life, right now. That can be easy to forget when you're doing as well as most of us are, so that's why it's so important to come and be reminded here, together, every week of who we are and where we're going, and if things go the way they should, to feel closer to the kingdom of God. God wants not just for us to be happy, but for us to be satisfied and truly joyful, and while the ways of the world promise to give us those things, only God's ways can secure them to us reliably and sustainably.

Remember also that Jesus gave these sayings to the disciples not for their own personal benefit, but in order to form them into apostles. His words may have been addressed to them, but they represent a vision for the benefit of the whole world, a reference God intends for everyone to get. If you come to the Annual Meeting later this morning I think you'll agree that we've got a good thing going here at Advent. I hope you'll agree that the next step for us, and simply the Christian thing to, do is to share what we have, to share Christ and ourselves, to invite others to experience the kingdom of God we have been blessed to experience here. We can't have too many people speaking God's beautiful common language of grace.

*Amy-Jill Levine, note on Luke 6:20, in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Levine and Brettler (Oxford University Press: New York), 113.