

Richard Bollman, S.J.
6th SUNDAY of the YEAR, C, 2019
Jeremiah 17:5-8; Luke 6:17-26
"Listening in the Crowds"

Today's Gospel,
and the selection we hear from Jeremiah's prophetic teaching,
are alike in this: they both set out contrasting ways of life.
The contrast calls us to look at our own basic values,
what do we trust, what do we pass on to our children.

Along with these readings, we follow the letter of Paul to the Corinthians,
continuing chapter 15, where Paul affirms so strongly
the resurrection of Jesus as the core of our trust.
Remember, Paul is a Jewish scholar who preaches Christ
because he had an experience of the risen Jesus.
That encounter was as vivid to him
as was the eye-witness contact of the 12 apostles.

So let us listen to be encouraged in our own faith,
and to be called to know our own hearts, insofar as we can.

HOMILY. 6th Sunday C. 2019

I went down to the Union Terminal Museum Center last Friday,
mainly to renew my membership. And it turned out to be crowded day
for anyone wanting to renew: free parking, and the opening of new exhibits,
one on volcanos, one on ancient Egypt. So at 10:30 I had a long wait in line.
As it turns out, it gave me time to remember today's Gospel: all the crowds.

In front of me were two moms who were friends together,
with 5 children circulating around, and one serene sleeping baby in a buggy;
I would have enjoyed pushing it, like a little shopping cart.
And behind me a young couple from Kentucky. And crowding all around,
other parents, children, some wandering away and retrieved,
the whole the museum a celebration of life in all its forms,
from the dinosaurs in one direction and the old streetcars in the other,

but mostly the real folks right here. I thought of Jesus' words:
"blessed are you who are poor, the kingdom of God is yours."

I imagined saying that out loud. I'm not sure about the word "poor"
but economy and affording things is an issue around me more than I know,
like the free parking, membership itself, a bargain for mothers all through the year.
One woman told me she comes a lot, that the children's museum down below
is a great play area; "they learn something and I get a rest."
And with a membership card its not expensive.
And as if to alert me to this, one little guy had his back turned toward me,
and there emblazoned in white letters on his lime green t-shirt, this phrase,
"Blessed are We." His school had won an award, I found out,
but to me it was a voice from the Gospel. Among all these voices. A Blessing.
I felt close to Jesus' villages standing in line there.
Waiting in a crowd is a great leveler, no privilege, no special first class line.
Like feeling at home, maybe, on a Sunday: among the living here,
the poor, our own hungers, the weeping you know about in your own truth.
Blessed are you: that's what Jesus was moved to say when he saw the crowd.
Blessed are we.

And so these words today about happiness and woe,
this is not a speech of new commandments, or putting people down.
He is speaking about who we all are, and what it is to be human.
These are things we're always learning.

The museum trip continued to be a learning for me,
after I renewed my own membership and wondered what was open now.
The desk clerk told me there was an entirely new exhibit in the lower level
called Holocaust and Humanity, connecting it to the people of Cincinnati.
Many survivors, I was told, had come through this very terminal.

It was in those exhibit rooms that I met people who lived beyond poverty,
people whom Jesus singles out in the Gospel today,
who survived through hatred and insult,
being denounced and marked as evil.
These were European Jews marked with yellow stars,
and numbers tattooed on their arms. And this was not a distant history:
the photographs from the past showed some people who are our neighbors,
who live in Cincinnati. They are there in the displays, on the screens,
old voices now talking to you, telling their origins

in Germany, Poland, Greece, Austria,
and their travels through Europe to Belgium, and finally Spain and Lisbon.
Young at the time, children even, recalling the morning bombs fell
or trains pulled up. Their voices reach out strongly from room to room
like friends telling about hope, telling about loss and fear and outrage.
Blessed are you, Jesus said to that crowd, you who suffer prejudice and abuse,

Who did he have in mind, down the years into our own world?
And who did I find to remember right now, how neighbors in town here
have had to put up with profiling and exclusion, suspicion, and closed doors.
There is a pleading in these Cincinnati voices that rings out
for the sake of refugees and asylum seekers, of any race or politics,
who want us to know that denunciation is wrong in every era.
Blessed are we. We who have suffered through and thank God for it.

At the end of the intricate exhibit you are invited to consider
how anybody who survives has relied on the hidden help of people around them,
encouragement, even in the camps, or some who stepped up creating
hidden escape routes and hiding places,
like we know in Ohio and beyond with the Underground Railroad.
The exhibit asks that you consider your own strengths to help in our world now:
your bravery, kindness, perspective, human compassion, hope, desire to know.
How will you stand up to make a difference?

So there it is, the Gospel speaking to our humanity today.
In our ordinary efforts and joys, sharing a city, a church, a neighborhood.
What matters most: what do we want from life?
A good question as we witness a baptism and remember our own.

Some time ago I came across an essay about these matters
by the American theologian Monica Helwig.
She asked the question "Do the Poor Understand the Gospel Better"?
I've heard from you all who have done work in Central America,
or Harlan or among the poor here in town,
talking about the quality of the faith and trust that opens up among them.

Here are just five of fifteen elements of the faith of the poor
that Monica Helwig lists.

- The poor know that they are in urgent need of redemption.

- The poor know their dependence on God, and on powerful people, but also their interdependence with one another.
- The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation.
- The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries.
- And finally, the poor listen to the Gospel as good news, not a threat or a scolding.

So where is your own poverty?

Where does it burn and pain you, embarrass you even,
where does it look for companionship? How do you trust?
And there is the kingdom of heaven.