

One of my favorite movies of all time is the Robin Williams film of 30 years ago, *Dead Poets Society*. Any of you remember it? I think it may have been Williams's best role ever, and his performance as a teacher in a high-toned prep school was nothing less than astonishing.

In the film, he is faced with the daunting task of teaching poetry to a reluctant class of teenage boys. In one of the more surprising moments of the film, we see the teacher leap up on his desk and ask the class,

Why do I stand here? To feel taller than you? No, I stand on this desk to remind myself that we must force ourselves to look at things differently. The world looks different from up here. If you don't believe me, stand up here and try it.

One by one, the boys in the class – with one exception, as I remember – take their turns doing as the teacher asks. They stand on the desk and view the classroom from the new and different perspective. Williams's character goes on:

Try never to think about anything the same way twice. If you're sure about something, force yourself to think about it a different way. When you read, don't just consider what the *author* thinks, take the time to consider what *you* think.

As those of you who have seen it know, a great deal of what happens in the rest of that film finds its roots in that little speech. And here's the connection I want to make between that dramatic moment and what we've just heard about in the Gospel this morning. I want to say that, in a way, Jesus was trying to get his listeners to stand on a desk. To get them to view things from a different perspective.

You know, it's curious how often Luke uses geography as a way of setting off some aspect of Jesus' ministry. We hear him describe in excruciating detail the relationship between Nazareth of Galilee and the Judean town of Bethlehem. Or how Jesus stood in a boat to teach, not just any old place, but by the lake at Gennesaret. Places are important to Luke, and I believe the place of today's passage is no accident. Where Matthew places Jesus on a hillside teaching this all-too-familiar lesson, Luke places him on level ground – right where the people live. Luke's Jesus goes to the mountains to *pray* and to level ground to *teach*.

Place also enters into the picture as we hear about all the places people came from to hear Jesus and learn from him. They come from Judea and Jerusalem, places that represent the heart of the Jewish world. And they come also from Tyre and Sidon,

places far away, places where, predominantly, Gentiles live. From near and far they come to Jesus – are drawn to Jesus – to hear a message worth coming many miles to hear. And now, speaking from their midst, Jesus in essence jumps up on his desk and begins to teach them.

He begins with a statement sure to get their attention. **“Blessed are you who are poor,”** he tells them, **“for yours is the Kingdom of God.”** Blessed are you who are *poor*? Everything in that society said that the way you could tell someone was blessed was by noting how *rich* they were. Now Jesus is turning that perspective on its ear, and at these words, every ear perked up. They may not have been students, writing away in their notebooks as if at a college lecture, but, believe me, they took note. They remembered what he said, because he said something worth repeating – something worth thinking and talking about. Do we hear Jesus in just as earth-shaking a way?

I think perhaps one of the greatest sins the Church has perpetrated down through the centuries, is domesticating Jesus. Making him a calm, kind doer of good. We’ve lost our sense of astonishment, and have almost made his radical statements some kind of throw-away words. Almost too familiar, robbing them of their challenge. Can you imagine a “domesticated” Robin Williams? Neither can I. And we shouldn’t let ourselves settle for a domesticated Jesus either.

One way I’ve found of doing this is reading his words in fresh and different translations. One such translation was produced some years ago by a man named Eugene Peterson. He produced a translation – a paraphrase, really – of the New Testament that makes it almost read like a breathlessly-paced novel. And in it, Jesus’ words jump out like words uttered from atop a desk. Listen to the way Peterson translates the passage we heard a few moments ago in this Bible called ***The Message***:

“You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all. God’s Kingdom is there for the finding. You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry. Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal. You’re blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the mourning.”

At the very least these words bring new life to a teaching we’ve heard so often we cast it off without real appreciation.

- **“You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all.”** Who wants to hear that?
- **“You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry.”** Who wants to be that starved?
- **“You’re blessed when the tears flow freely.”** Who wants to be that sad and have to experience that kind of grief?

Think, if you will, of how foreign all this really is to our consumer-oriented society. We live with messages which declare that we deserve the best. We should drive the best cars, live in the largest houses, shop at the finest stores, and the list goes on and on.

And what do those messages really try to say? That somehow our salvation is found in those things. We're supposed to find true happiness and worth by all those external things. Now, be honest with me. If they really worked, would any of us be here in church this morning? I daresay, if we found our happiness in what Madison Ave. wants us to believe, not a one of us would be here.

But, you see, we are here because deep down, and perhaps *not* so deep down, we know that many of the promises made by the consumer society are false. Our marriages aren't better because of all the things we've acquired. Our children aren't happier. And bad things still happen to good people, even to good people who seem to have all the "things" that are supposed to make all the difference.

Blessed are you when you've lost it all. Maybe you're blessed because you've started to lose faith in all those externals. Maybe you're blessed because you've started to be honest about the false pursuit of meaning and purpose in all those external things.

Or maybe you think Jesus is crazy. A predecessor to the wild antics of the late, great, Robin Williams, someone who really doesn't have his head on straight. Well, you know, I know some crazy people like him. I'm thinking at the moment of a nurse who could live quite comfortably at her home in Maine but chooses for six months of the year not to, bringing medical care to people in the Ivory Coast of Africa. I'm thinking of the crazy person who actually gives away ten percent of his income, who tithes, not out of some huge income like that of a lawyer or doctor or engineer, but out of his humble living in a menial job, and says that, for him, it's the only way to live.

Maybe you've been crazy enough to do something the world would call foolish, upside-down, backwards. Something putting losers first. Or the hungry first. The grief stricken perhaps. No one who ever ends up in one of the situations he calls "blessed" feel that way, feel like they're first in God's eyes. But that is where God places them – and meets them. Until we get that figured out, we're at the back of the line.

The grace of God is finally and ultimately about the fact that we contribute absolutely nothing to our salvation. All of the good we do doesn't begin to crack open the door of heaven. Until you've lost it all, you can't know this. Until you and I begin to realize the futility of trying to win God's favor, you and I can't begin to get to first base with Jesus.

Jesus begins teaching the people who have lost it all, who are hungry, who are grief stricken. He stands up on the desk and gets them to see their condition from an entirely new perspective. Are we ready to stand up on that desk with him? To hear the good

news with an entirely different set of ears, an entirely new perspective of what makes it good news?

Blessed are you when you've lost it all. Jump up on the desk and look at that from a whole new angle. Amen.