

Sermon, April 30, 2023

Psalm 23; Acts 2:42-47

“Faithful Followers: It’s Good to Be Poor (Sometimes)”

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A couple of weeks ago, I talked about how nostalgia, that longing for the past, can be a powerful force in our life. It reminds us of how quickly time passes, and that there are things we used to love that are gone. And they make sense, of course. I mean, you can’t preserve everything. Things decay. Our priorities shift. As we said a few weeks ago, life is in a constant state of change. The demands of the populace and ever burgeoning technology force us to change and make way. Of course, that doesn’t mean it’s always for the better. Change for change’s sake isn’t always the best approach.

Take, for instance, that great roller coaster haven on the shores of Lake Erie, Cedar Point. I’ve gone there since I was a small child, my wife grew up near there and worked there in college, so we have a long history. And the thing about Cedar Point is that it has incredible rides but limited space. So some things have to go in order to make way for something new and thrilling. It’s just how it is. And for the most part, it makes perfect sense. Actually, there is a website that lists all of the old rides.

But let me say for the life of me, and it happened well over 40 year ago, I’ll never understand the closing of the Cedar Point Fun House. Yes, it was over forty years ago and I’m still a little salty about it. It was a great amusement. It was all about being disoriented. One room was upside down, you walked on the

ceiling, and there were things that should be on the floor on the ceiling. There was a hall of mirrors that was hard to get through, you had to fight your way through a multitude of reflections of yourself and others, often crashing into people as you walked through it. Some rooms were made so that while you thought you were walking straight, you would find yourself running over into a wall. And then to exit, you went through this hole that was a slide that sent you out back outside. I read one person's memory of this was their father, who chose to wear nylon pants that day, come off the slide doing about 90 miles an hour. Thankfully, a worker caught him before he shot out onto the midway.

Yes, it doesn't match up to the fun of a hyper engineered coaster. But there was something fun about being disoriented, about things not being the way they are supposed to be. It shuts down your senses and causes you to try to reorient yourself to everything. As a child, I thought this would be the greatest house in the world to live in. Why doesn't every house have rooms like this? Surely, they would be better than our normal old boring rooms. Of course, the truth is, one can take just so much disorientation. Our brains can take just so much of that. It would begin to cope. In fact, I would guess that if we lived in a world where funhouses were the norm, we would, at some point, begin to see them as normal, seeing everything out of proportion as what is right, and we'd see the real world around us as being disorienting and well, upside down.

We are in the third week of a new series we are calling Faithful Followers. What does it mean to be faithful follower of Jesus? Not just a follower of Jesus, but faithful, consistent in our following Jesus. And I read an article, one that stuck with me. The author said the problem we have as Christians in following Jesus is that His kingdom is upside down. Leaders are servants, the meek are the powerful, the gentle are the strong. He said that it's a bit disorienting when we follow Jesus because of the upside-down nature of his kingdom in the world.

And I liked it. I liked what he had to say, but as I've matured as a Christian, I'm not sure he got it quite right. Rather, I think the reality is that the Kingdom of God isn't upside down at all. It's actually right side up. It's how things are meant to be, how we are meant to be. The problem is that we have been living in the upside down, disorienting reality of the world around us that we have come to assume this is what's right and good. It's not the Kingdom of God that's upside down, it's the Kingdom of Man that has it wrong. And while it may be disorienting, when we follow Jesus in time, we see that is actually God setting us right, helping to see the world, ourselves, truth and values in a right side up manner, as they should be.

And nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the issue of poverty. The world will tell us that poverty is bad. That the richer we are, the happier we are and the more successful we will be. And while the poor

ought to be pitied, helped, prayed for, none of us really would want to be poor. It's one of those things we avoid at all costs.

Now, I will not argue that, all things being equal, it's better to have money than to not. It's much better to be able to pay our bills and have some financial security than to not. Of course it is. But I will assert as we look at scripture, that we may have the idea of poverty upside down and that not all poverty ought to be avoided. That sometimes, in the right side up Kingdom of God, being in a place of voluntary poverty can be a blessing. It's not always bad to be in a place of poverty. Especially when we can willingly enter into it. This morning as we reorient ourselves as faithful followers of Christ, I want to explore a few ways poverty can be achieved when we enter into it.

We find joy when we enter the poverty of possession. Now, having a poverty of possession doesn't mean we have nothing. Rather, it means we need to come to a place where we look at everything we have and say "God, this is yours. Do with it as You will because none of it is mine, it came from You and will go back to You. Use what I have as You will." When we enter into the poverty of possession, we discover that many of our possessions possess us. We worry over them, And at some point, what we have can stop being a blessing and become a curse to us. I heard a podcast where there were some nuns as guests, and they talked about how in their abbey they never use the words my or mine in relation to things. Has anyone seen our pen? They see everything they have as a blessing for everyone, not just them. That seems healthier to me than the often toddler-like response we have where everything in sight must be claimed loudly as mine. This is exactly what we see from the early Christians in our passage from Acts.

Secondly, enjoy the poverty of time. Time is often our greatest commodity, and we resent intrusion into it. But what if we began to see when people encroach our time to see them as one put it, Blessed Interruptions. Your child or grandchild barging in, asking to play will cost you time from a project. But it's a blessed interruption. Allow yourself the poverty of time. That person who comes to you when you are busy at work may have a good word from God for you or needs one from you. You might change that person's life. When we begin to see them as *blessed interruptions* rather than a loss of our time, we resent others less and eventually have a healthier attitude toward our time.

Embrace being poor in spirit. This is a hard one. But I heard a young man who was really struggling during Covid from being cut off from his friends, his church, and his spirit was, he felt, atrophying. And his spiritual advisor said, "Take advantage of this time". He said "this pandemic will not last forever, and you're going to have church and friends and life again. But don't waste this time, because God is going to say somethings to you and do things in your life that He cannot do under any other circumstances." Embrace it. And I

thought Wow. Instead of resenting it, embrace the poverty because Jesus says the poor in spirit are blessed. God touches you in your down times in ways He will not when you are on the mountaintop.

In the end, it's not bad to be poor. In fact, it can be good. Embrace poverty to time, passion, and spirit. Allow Jesus to reorient you right side up and find the blessing in that it's not always so bad to be poor. Amen.