

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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By Pádraig O Tuama

Introduction

What are you like in a group?

Presumably the answer is that it depends on the kind of group.

This week's text — Luke's telling of the Beatitudes — is a study in the energies of a group, and a fascinating insight into the mind and point of view of Jesus of Nazareth.

As you prepare to read the text, you may wish to recall the various groups you interact with every week: the group of people you live with; the group in your classroom or congregation; the group who wait for the bus every morning; the groups you zoom with; the groups you play sport with... consider the energies and powers in that group and how you approach them: which ones cause you stress? which ones do you prepare a lot for? which ones do you expect to be easy and rewarding? which ones do you dread?

Text

Luke 6:17-26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

Comment

While most people are familiar with Matthew’s telling of the Beatitudes, the Lukan version is still recognizable. It is, however, the introduction to this telling that intrigues me most:

“He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.”

A great crowd... a great multitude... people from all Judaea, Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre and Sidon... they had come to hear him and to be healed... and all in the crowd were trying to touch him... and [he] healed all of them.

Just those words alone are enough to render some people breathless with worry. The demand on Jesus of Nazareth: the projection of deep unconscious — and conscious — desires upon him by the crowd; the expectation that he could meet their needs; the sense of ownership upon him demonstrated in the crowds’ desire to touch him... Groups of people are capable of the most extraordinary acts: they can crush, they can amass into a violent crowd, they can surge forward like a wave, they can dissipate, they can extol with great joy, they can demand and deny.

The images of the Beatitude scene in picture bibles are usually serene. But this story seems anything but serene. It seems chaotic, demanding. I like groups of people, but imagining the energy indicated from the intro to Luke’s beatitudes, I begin to feel a little panicky. Somehow, however, when Jesus sees this crowd, he manages to read their hunger, to go deeper than jostling and crowding and touching and demanding. In Luke’s telling, he doesn’t get the crowd to sit down, or even quiet. He doesn’t address them. He addresses the disciples. This is a lesson on how to be present to the energy of a crowd, a crowd with needs. It is a lesson on group theology, and a lesson on leadership.

He sees people who are poor and speaks of their desire for the inbreaking of God; he sees people who are hungry, and near weeping, and honours their desire for satisfaction and their deep desire for dignity. He can tell from this crowd that they are used to being hated, reviled, excluded and defamed. In the face of the isolating powers of such experiences, he offers reassurance that they are not alone. He has warnings for the rich, for those who can luxuriate while others suffer, those whose popularity is high while they're not being held to account...

Why does he address this to the disciples? I always imagine it was a test to see how many of them had an intuition to read a crowd as a communication of need rather than a mob to be controlled, manipulated or exploited. He was giving a lesson on containment: how to contain the projections of a crowd and read their deeper needs. Jesus of Nazareth was a man fluent in the psycho dynamics of crowds: at times he could sense their deepest hunger and respond; at other times he sensed their chaos and withdrew, or challenged, or redirected. Here, he wishes to name their needs, not to quell their desires, but to give reassurances, from the most practical to the most existential: the desire for food, for satisfaction, for a home that houses your yearning.

Where did Jesus learn such an approach to crowds? He was no innocent. He knew what crowds were capable of, and he was surely to learn this even more as his public life continued. But it does seem that at certain times, especially with crowds who were manifesting their yearning in public, a true yearning, his approach was one of extraordinary engagement, honouring and dignifying rather than one of silencing, coercing or manipulating them.

Often when a group is encountered, they are encountered *en masse*, and as such are treated as an experiment in control. Jesus of Nazareth was skilled at controlling — or at least trying to — a crowd. But this is not his only tactic. This crowd, who might on another day have tried to take him by force and make him king, does not need to be toned down. Rather, Jesus sees that the crowd's deep yearning needs to be turned into an opportunity for connection, community and solidarity.

Response

Consider the groups that you interact with on a regular basis. If you were to name what your overarching desire is towards those groups, what would it be? To get them to finish their meal? To get them in and out safely and on time? To quieten them? To rile them up?

As you consider these groups, reflect on how it is that this text would direct your leadership and imagination: your leadership with the group, and your imagination about what they most need, and how you can be part of a shared exploration of such elemental hungers.

Prayer

Public Jesus,
when you were in crowds,
you somehow saw their hunger:
hunger for justice, or
hunger for revenge.

Help us, in all the crowds we inhabit
to read the signs

and know how to respond
to the deepest hungers.
Because you invite us
at our truest hungers. Nothing else
will truly satisfy.

Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: