

Blessed be God who animates our lives and helps us write the unique verses of our lives within the guardrails of blessing and woe. amen

Today Luke offers us the sermon on the plain, very different in place and tone from the sermon on the mount in Matthew's Gospel. Very different beatitudes! At first blush, a major difference is that Luke, unlike Matthew, offers not only blessings but woes. The content is different as well. No talk of the merciful...no talk of the righteous.

However, It seems to me that this balance of blessings and woes is equally radical, calling us to completely rethink our assumptions and values, yet also more direct and unavoidable. Jesus is right there among us, on our level, no escape.

It causes me to think about what other situations and stories in our lives effectively cause us to create our own narratives in the midst of the lessons and legacies of others. Classrooms come to mind...so do churches...

I am reminded of one of my favorite movies, Dead Poets Society and one scene in particular.

In order to make a point, about uniqueness of individual gifts and character, Williams' character Mr Keating stands atop a desk. He does so to advocate that the boys always remind themselves to find ways to look at things differently. Whenever you think you know something or are sure, question that...you will find your own voice that way.

Those adolescent boys moved from shock, through doubt, to joyful surprise and courage. Much like the Christian journey toward identity in hope which does not disappoint. In fact theology itself is defined as faith seeking understanding.

The scene in the movie which comes approximately one third into the film follows what has also become well used: Mr Keating recites O Captain My Captain by Walt Whitman and exhorts the boys to live into the life-giving qualities of poetry, to let words speak to their lives alone and together, and to ask of themselves What Will Your Verse Be?

In this famous Whitman poem the captain is Abraham Lincoln who died before the abolition of slavery was realized.

To quote from Whitman, 'O me! O life!... of the questions of these recurring; of the endless trains of the faithless... of cities filled with the foolish; what good amid these, O me, O life?' Answer. That you are here — that life exists, and identity; that the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?"

I wonder whether Luke, another poet here, is writing his beatitudes poem about his captain, our captain, Jesus who died, and rose again, before the fullness of the Kingdom was realized.

It seems to me that Jesus is offering guideposts, or guardrails, in the form of blessings and woes, about how to keep on the Christian path. The blessings and woes read like symmetrical instructions: enough attention and ministry toward hunger results in blessing; lack thereof results in woe. Woe is not necessarily sin, it is more of a warning that we are driving on the wrong side of the center line.

The center line is God. The center always holds.

Dead Poets Society has come to be known as an iconic film about how to look at one's identity differently, how to learn differently, how to prioritize differently. In sum, it is an allegory of how to embrace unique identity rather than mimicry of

questionable values, both as individuals and as members of a community. And...Mr Keating makes clear that a crucial part of identity development, creative, imaginative and unique, is to listen to our ancestors...those who came before. The Dead Poets...

Jesus too comes among us on the plain to shift our perspectives, radically! He teaches us how to write our own verses in life. These verses, life lived in Christ, will be written between the guardrails of blessings and woes. If we stay within them, if we heed them, we are on the sanctified path.

Whatever our verse's content, its meaning is pleasing to God when we radically commit to that divine center which guides our ministry to the poor the hungry the helpless and the marginalized.

Identity formation, writing our unique verses, is a life task. Some theologians have claimed it is the most important question in Christian formation: who am I?

A classroom, a sanctuary, a plain...what do these have in common? Most simply they are but three

spaces in which our life work of identity formation takes place or is worked out.

All three usually have some trained leader: a teacher, a priest, a rabbi who is both on the Luke's plain.

But most especially for today's purposes these are but three spaces where we hear some kind of divine word if we listen, some call toward our greatest selves. We might hear the sound of the genuine.

Learning theory would tell us we learn best and heed these messages when there is a dialectic, a give and take, a socratic dialogue which goes on and on...

Identity formation is really a series of negotiating of crises. In the case of teenage boys between identity formation and confusion. But ultimately we are all on that spectrum of discovering our true selves while shedding our false ones. We are hopeful that with God's help we will negotiate our crises and write a verse of wisdom instead of despair. This would indicate we have integrated our life experiences. We have integrated the blessings and the woes.

Well, I could go on and on, but for today the point I would like us to reflect on is that there is an

efficiency and meaning to Jesus' sermon on the plain which while beatific like Matthew is less lecture and more interactive. More guide than sermon.

As such it invites human participation instead of observance.

I am able to participate in a God who understands my feeble attempts and weaknesses as well as my deep desire to please. I am able to keep on trying trusting in a merciful God. I am guided by many dead poets offering inspiration about how to live into God's desire for us.

We have committed as a parish to a theme this year of Mission and Ministry. The theme itself asks the question how will we participate in God's mission of Bringing about the flourishing of the Kingdom.

It asks what will our verse be In this great poetry of creation!

I invite you to spend some time this week reflecting on your verse in this great life. I invite you to dust off your imagination and be anything you desire if you could be. God calls us to our fullest freest selves.

Sermon: Blessings and Woes: The guardrails of our faith
The Rev. Dr. Martha Tucker
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The journey toward realizing our true selves is filled with blessing and woes, joys and sorrows, and like a tree in the wind we might be bent and cracked, but if our roots go deeply into the grace of God we will sustain and survive and even thrive.

Claim your place in this amphitheater of life and offer your most genuine self. I cannot wait to learn what your verse will be!