

The Valiant Words of Christ Bless Our Advocacy

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[The following is Father Driscoll's homily for the Celebration of the Eucharist on June 9, 2003, at the 88th Catholic Health Assembly in Orlando, Florida.]



If, as Bernard Shaw [former CNN principal anchor and CHA opening keynote speaker] said yesterday, our words have impact, can you imagine the impact of God's word bellowing down the mountainside, and echoing through the valleys of this wide world of ours?

We are women and we are men of the Word. We are women and men of the Word become flesh. I once read a blunt reminder that John in the prologue of his gospel did not say, "and the Word became interesting;" rather he said, "the Word became flesh." As I reminded us at the beginning of the liturgy this morning, the danger of this morning's gospel [Matthew 5:1-12] is familiarity that breeds maybe not contempt, but even worse, a certain dull dreariness that in essence says, "oh, the beatitudes," and off our minds, our eyes, and our being wanders to the right and to the left from this person to that person, out of this room and into yesterday or out to tomorrow.

And thus the Word is, well, "interesting."

But what if the Word really becomes flesh? What if the Word were to come into our hearts, and onto to our lips, and into our lives? I sometimes envy our evangelical sisters and brothers in the body of Christ for the way they so desire to eat and drink of that Word of God. Do you notice them on the television as the preacher bellows and echoes the scriptures come down the mountainside and how they each have their texts open, underlining, and writing notes, and just playing with the meaning of those words, like Bernard Shaw played so eloquently with his words yesterday?

Joan Chittister in quoting from the rabbis says that one must take the words of a sentence or saying and string them out in front of them, and shake them so strongly, until the words all fall away and all we have left is the meaning.

The work of advocacy for the disciple of Jesus is not simply writing a letter to a congressperson. The work of advocacy for the disciple of Jesus is first letting God write a letter in our hearts that then inspires us – a Pentecost word – inspire, in-spirit – us to write to our congressperson.

The work of advocacy for the disciple of Jesus is not simply speaking up for the poor people who are disadvantaged or disenfranchised. The work of advocacy for the disciple of Jesus is first letting God speak in the space of our hearts that then inspires, in-spirits – us to speak and act for the poor people who are disadvantaged or disenfranchised.

In other words, the Advocate needs to advocate with us, to us, from within us, and then we shall renew the face of the earth.

So this morning we have this word of God, this beatitude, this blessing, this greatest sermon on the mount – the first of the five sermons Matthew gives form to in his attempt to en flesh the teachings of Jesus. Remember for Matthew, Jesus is "Emmanuel" – the "God with us." And for us, his disciples, that proclamation, "God is with us," is our marching orders in history, a true call to advocacy – we are called to be "God with us" to all God's people.

So if we were to string these words in front of us and shake them strongly, what might fall out for us in our focus on advocacy in this inspired conversation with Jesus from the mount?

I suggest three realities. First, these words of

blessing – beatitude – echo with voices. It’s like turning on a computer and hearing that initial music as it boots up – a little unexpected since I open my computer to read or to write, and all of a sudden a noise comes out of it. I open the gospel of Matthew this morning to read the words and all of a sudden I hear voices, the voices of the downtrodden of the earth. The secret is that all of us are at one or another time downtrodden. The voices are not just theirs, but the voices are ours.

The poor in spirit, the sorrowing, lowly, those that hunger and thirst for holiness – those that are often voiceless now have a voice bellowing down the mountainside and echoing through the valleys of this wide world of ours.

I am reminded of Teddy in the inner city of Boston in the mid-1980s. Literally, opening the parish house door to Teddy, a mentally disabled yet gentle spirit, who came to ask me if I would call the cable company for him so he could get cable television. Anyone who has spent any time in the inner city knows that requests like this are the norm: a basic need and a basic response of “giving a cup of cold water to the least of the little ones.”

Teddy had to be seven feet tall – and in his extremely high, tinny voice, he would call the company and they would hang up on him because they considered him a prank caller.

So I became his voice. And sadder than the discrimination toward a disabled man was the systemic discrimination I encountered after hours and hours of calls to supervisors and more supervisors, when I realized the reality that our section of the city was redlined. I was told they could not go in and install cable television because it was a “low frequency area.”

Jesus in these beatitudes gives voices to those who are downtrodden. And he gives voice to those who would reach a hand and a heart out to others by showing mercy, by striving to be single-hearted, by being a peacemaker, by suffering on account of holiness, on being persecuted for his sake. In blessing the voiceless, and those who seek to give voice, Jesus is uniting all of us. Because the secret is that at some time we are voiceless and we need others to give us voice, and then other times we are the voice to the voiceless.

The second reality is that these words of blessing – beatitude – respond with vigor. When I think of vigor, I think of a dinner I shared with an Italian-American friend, Christopher, over 20 years ago. As our fresh New England fish dinners came, we both picked up the lemon on our respective plates to squeeze the juices. Chris took that lemon in both hands, squeezed it, rolled it, turned it over, and then grabbed another doing the same – lemon dripping down his arms fully engaged with this process like it was a sacred ritual. In contrast, I had gently squeezed a few drops on the fish and was already well into eating.

Vigor is squeezing, rolling, and turning over the words of Jesus until they drip all over me and

my plate and my life. The words have vigor. Jesus is talking here about the reign of God belonging to the poor, about the sorrowing being consoled, about the lowly receiving land, about thirsting for holiness and having our fill, about the merciful receiving mercy, about the singlehearted seeing God, about peacemakers being daughters and sons of God, about a reward in time to come.

When John Carr [Secretary, Department of Social Development and World Peace, USCCB] spoke yesterday about what was not happening in his parish, I, and I suggest, we, know too well his experience. In too many places the Word isn’t even interesting; it is dull, boring, and lifeless. It is because we don’t squeeze the vigor of this Word. Rather the Word hangs out there like sheets on a clothesline – “oh, will somebody go take them in?”

The final reality that I suggest is that these words of blessing – beatitude – are valiant. These blessings stand tall and proud as Jesus’ word reaches out and lifts up the lowly – not just “them,” but all of “us,” from the valley of hopelessness and despair and disappointment to the mountain where the inbreaking reign of God comes down in human history and will make level the paths on which we trod.

These words are valiant because Jesus with voice, and vigor, is blessing all the people, in all the spaces and places, of all times, and in all of history. Each of these beatitudes has footnotes on the footpaths of Jesus’ ministry narrated in the rest of the gospel. Poor, sorrowing, and lowly persons continually cross Jesus’ path in lepers, blind and deaf, women hemorrhaging, those with sick children, those collecting taxes, women cast aside, all blessed, all held in the eyes, the heart and the mind of Jesus.

As a health care ministry today, we need the Word bellowing down the mountain with voice, and vigor and valiant blessing. We need the Advocate within us before we can advocate on the outside. We need the impact of God’s word before our words can have impact.

A Jesuit retreat master, George Kreiger, once said of prayer:

Pray always.

Abbreviate it when you must,

Expand it when you can,

But never omit it.

For us, this ministry of healing is Jesus’ ministry, not ours. It is his word, not ours. It is his advocacy not ours. Until that is, we are so impacted by his word – daily – abbreviating it if we must, expanding it when we can, but never omitting it – until that is, we are so impacted by his word, that that word is taken, blessed broken and eaten at the table of the word, just as we will now take, bless, break and eat at the table of the Eucharist.

With voice, and vigor goes the valiant word of God in us. Can you imagine the impact? ▼

The Advocate needs to advocate with us, to us, from within us, and then we shall renew the face of the earth.