

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I don't know about you, but I am SO drawn to the blessings that Jesus gives in this passage, that I often gloss over WHO Jesus is speaking to, WHO this message is addressed to.

As Matthew tells it, Jesus delivers this speech on a hill, speaking to his disciples and surrounded by a crowd..... of people.

In Greek there are two words for "crowds"- the one used here and throughout Jesus' ministry is "Ochlos." Scholars say that this particular word refers to "anonymous mass as distinct from [persons] of rank or officials." ^[1] Basically, they are everyday people.

Later on, in Matthew, we see Jesus being questioned by religious authorities, the elite of the temple and government. But HERE, the people in THIS crowd, the *ochlos*- are people that the Roman Empire doesn't treat kindly, because they don't have a special rank. Actually, they may have even been sick or in pain or paralyzed because those were the people Jesus was healing right before this sermon.

If that's the case, they wouldn't have been able to work or pay taxes and so they wouldn't have been of any rank or value in the eyes of the Roman political or economic systems.

Not only did society NOT bless them, but their society had no other NAME for them except for this word- the “ochlos”- the crowd.

These are the people that Jesus is speaking to. That are waiting and longing to see if Jesus will treat them like the rest of their society, or if he has something different to offer.

We have plenty of “ochlos” today as well- crowds of people who very often go unrecognized, unblessed and unnamed by the powers that be.

We see this during this time of Pandemic- the people working hardest and struggling the most, seem to be the most under-supported and even ignored. Essential workers on the front lines are barely getting THEIR basic needs met. Janitors and people who clean our buildings go without the proper protective equipment. Bus drivers, dishwashers, waitresses risk their lives by leaving their houses during a pandemic, but don't get paid enough to make ends meet.

Unfortunately, long before the pandemic, countless people of color have known what it means to be a statistic. We were reminded this summer with George Floyd's murder that while some acts of police brutality against black lives are recorded, so many more are never seen, never witnessed, never protested, and never receive justice.

Their stories, their names are NOT often mentioned on the news or by elected officials. They don't come up at the workplace or at family gatherings. At church, too, we can overlook the “ochlos”– the crowds of underrepresented and undervalued people.

As Jesus starts speaking to the crowds on the hill, he is not just listing a bunch of qualities that everyone felt they had to live up to. Rather, he is describing the people THERE WITH HIM. He is blessing people who otherwise have received no blessing.

Pastor and Greek Scholar D. Mark Davis says that the word “Blessing” could also be translated as Honored.^[2] With these abundant blessings, Jesus is Honoring people that otherwise receive no honor by their society.

He names people who haven’t been recognized before. He sees people who had been overlooked and trampled down by the rest of society. He gives voice to their experience. He lets them know that there is an honored place for them in God’s kingdom- God’s vision for the world.

With each blessing spoken by Jesus, he declares that the downtrodden, overlooked, and mis-understood by society, are at the CENTER of God’s vision for the world.

Jesus blesses ALL people who are otherwise left on the margins. As he does this, Jesus also gives us an example of how we too can join in God’s love for all people by honoring and blessing all those who the rest of society would prefer NOT to name or even remember.

To say:

“Blessed are you who have worked countless long shifts at the hospital without rest.”

“Blessed are you teachers who have had to re-learn how to teach, completely online”

“Blessed are the newlyweds whose wedding didn’t look like anything they imagined.

“Blessed are those who have buried loved ones in a pandemic”

“Blessed are the unemployed, the furloughed, the gig workers. Anyone struggling to make ends meet.”

“Blessed are those who hunger for an end to police brutality and all racial discrimination”

“For God loves you. You are a priority to God and God’s vision for the world.”

With these blessings we join with Jesus in honoring who the world does not honor. In blessing who the world does not.

The Black Lives Matter movement has taught us how important it is to do this every chance we have. They've shown us through hashtags like #SayHerName and sites like The Say Every Name website that lists the names and pictures of innocent BLACK individuals who have been unjustly murdered by police. They've shown us what it means to name what otherwise might be forgotten situations of injustice and give a voice to individuals that otherwise would have been silenced.

Today especially, on All Saints Day, we follow Jesus’ example by naming people who may not be named in other spaces, and honoring people that otherwise are not honored.

We let the lives of the saints that we name, of all baptized people, and the lives of all the “ochlos”- the crowds then and now and throughout the ages- drive us to join Jesus in making God’s vision a reality. Where all people have a voice and a story. And no one is left nameless.

Amen.

[¹] Meyer, Katz, “Οχλος,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol 5) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 582.

[²] D. Mark Davis, “Left Behind and Loving It” Blog,
<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/01/honoring-dishonored.html>