St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

[Jeremiah 17:5-10](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Epiphany/CEpi6_RCL.html#ot1)

[Psalm 1](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Epiphany/CEpi6_RCL.html#ps1)

[1 Corinthians 15:12-20](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Epiphany/CEpi6_RCL.html#nt1)

[Luke 6:17-26](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Epiphany/CEpi6_RCL.html#gsp1)

Raised Blessings

Some of us have already visited the Portland Convention Center to enter into the immersive experience of an exhibit of the Dutch artist, Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh was a post-impressionist painter who, after his tragic death at only 37 years of age, became one of the most famous, revered and influential artists in Western art history. The exhibit, still running in Portland, is called Beyond Van Gogh, and if you haven’t seen it, you still have three weeks left to immerse yourself in this beautiful exhibit of his work.

To be immersed into something, be it the human condition or nature itself; be it a conversation, the written word or art, is to give more to it and to receive more from it than what one can simply experience on the surface. It is to go underneath and inside the motivation that raised the human expression in the first place. From what place within one does an idea emerge, how does nature, art or conversation carry those ideas into insights? What depth of thought, what unconscious need to set free…..what muse, maybe suffering and pain, or joy and passion… or recognition of any of these, motivate great writing, music or art on to the blank page or the blank canvass, or the empty stage of life itself?

Van Gogh lived a troubled life, largely driven by his artistic sensibility and his doubts about himself and the inner turbulence that drove him to a kind of madness. He was a faithful Christian, yet withdrawn and solitary, spurned by much of life and the world with little self-confidence or sense of worth. His need to serve humanity led him to an interest in ministry and theology, and finding orthodoxy and doctrine confining, he traveled to the coal-mining region of Belgium. It was there, in the deep winter, that he faced a huge spiritual crisis which led him to give away most of his worldly goods and was subsequently dismissed by the church for interpreting Christian teaching too literally.

It was here that his Christian faith ebbed and flowed, and when sensing that his faith was being destroyed by the world, he discovered his true gift as an artist.

Perhaps his faith, no matter the degree of its intensity, held firm through his recognition of his own vulnerabilities and self-doubts. Like the Jesus he followed, he felt a passionate and deeply meaningful connection to the downtrodden in life, the ones who struggled to survive, working hard to make ends meet and he made the decision that all his work would be to bring comfort and understanding into the lives of all humanity, especially those who suffered. “I want to give the wretched a brotherly message,” he said. “When I sign (my paintings) ‘Vincent,’ it is as one of them.” This sense of the restorative power of his painting, helped to bolster his own self-esteem and confidence.

As one who took time to immerse himself in the underlying meaning of life’s personal triumphs and tragedies, Van Gogh’s art invites one to take time to immerse oneself in his painting, and in their underlying meaning and motivation. Doing that is to allow oneself to truly begin to understand the man and his mission in a far deeper, more profound way and by way of this, to try to understand, as he did, Jesus’ message to his disciples as he is preparing to enter into the consequences of his own ministry. It is interesting to note that Jesus was very close to the same age as Van Gogh when he was struggling with those same kind of consequences 1,900 years later.

In the Gospel of Matthew there are eight blessings, but in Luke’s Gospel we heard four blessings and four of what Jesus calls, woes. They are dualities of reality which Van Gogh well understood and tried to convey through his art.

On the surface the blessings and woes seem pretty straight forward, especially if you don’t take time to immerse yourself in their underlying meaning. Jesus wasn’t concerned about who had money or who didn’t. But he was concerned with the human condition of people’s hearts and souls, and there are differences and nuances between those who work for the building of God’s kingdom and those who work for worldly success alone

There are rich people who are humble of heart, and who work to alleviate the suffering of the poor. There are poor, who are arrogant and filled with anger against the ones who have privileges. Then there are the rich who take no notice of the poor and could care less about them. And there are poor, who are humble in heart, blaming no one for the losses in their lives, yet still fall on their knees to thank God for the blessings they recognize as freely given by God.

None of these can be understood in concrete terms. The word “poor” need not be understood exclusively as an economic term, although Luke is certainly lifting up that social reality, especially in ancient Palestine. In our time, as a general rule, present time excepted, we don’t think of material goods as being in limited supply. In Jesus’ time, however there was a vastly different view of the availability of goods. All goods, whether material, or spiritual wealth such as honor, friendship, love, power, security and status, and everything that existed in living was in limited supply. Thus, if one had a goodly amount of any one of these, then it meant that someone else had far less. There was only so much to go around.

It makes one wonder if artists like Van Gogh, profoundly studious of the world swirling around him, grabbing and hoarding as much material good as possible and a good share of spiritual good, too, and sensing that his own share seemed to be consistently shrinking materially and spiritually, somehow felt the depth of exactly was Jesus was talking about.

In Jesus’ time, the honorable took only what was rightfully owned with no desire to acquire more by taking someone else’s rightful share. This would be viewed as stealing. Profit making and the building up of wealth as we know it ,would have been thought of in ancient days to be the result of extortion – literally the robbing of the poor. So to think of a rich man being honest in the first century was a bit of an oxymoron.

To be rich, was as much a social or moral statement as it was an economic one. Having the power to take from someone more vulnerable than oneself, that which was not one’s to take, put one in the position of having to hold consistent values for good or for evil.

 The New Testament often equates poverty with vulnerability or even misfortune. An inability to defend what was yours, would leave one poor. For Luke, the poor were the imprisoned, the blind, the debtors, the lame. Matthew depicts the poor as those who are blind, lame, or are lepers, are deaf and even dead. Mark writes of a poor widow, and thus a victim. Revelation describes the poor as “wretched, pitiable, blind and naked.”

You may recall the story of how the rich man is contrasted with the poor beggar Lazarus, covered with sores. Upon his death, Lazarus is raised up into the kingdom to be with God, all sores gone and filled with an abundance of joy and gratitude, and at the death of the rich greedy man, well, we all know where he ended up!

In that society power brought wealth. In our society wealth brings power. To be powerless meant one would be vulnerable to the greedy, who were like predators upon the weak.

I think all these years later, Van Gogh somehow lived into these kinds of sensibilities, seemingly always pulling forth the short end of life’s stick. The social condition of suffering for whatever reason, as a social condition relative to one’s neighbor, was the subject of Jesus’ teaching, that Van Gogh might well have understood as a victim of the world’s expectations. The poor are weak, the rich are strong. It was his art that allowed him an outlet for his sense of helplessness in the face of all that.

Like Jesus, the artist was moved deeply by the humble who had to struggle to make a living and yet were honest and accountable to do what it was had to be done. In his 1882 painting, *Women Carrying Sack of Coal in the Snow,* the women are struggling with the weight of the sacks of coal, and since their backs are to us, we don’t know who they are. Lacking identity, one not particularly distinguishable from another, they namelessly walk away from us into the distance which seems somehow infinite. That seeming lack of destination, gives us a very real sense that life will never change for them, and that the destination they may be dreaming about may never appear.

How much Jesus would have understood that painting and how much the artist understood that human condition. Jesus’ teaching was focused on those whose willingness to suffer so that the will of God may be blessed. It is to these that Jesus promises comfort and assurance. Whether in the first century or today, whether one’s work is simple and uncomplicated by life or whether it is the product of a brilliant but troubled creative mind, it is into these lives that God can enter in, and that they will revel in the blessings of God’s grace.

Like Van Gogh, himself, and like Jesus, they know life’s reality, and they allow themselves to be completely dependent upon God’s care, comfort and grace, which they receive in limitless abundance.

It is through the richness of God’s mercy and grace that a joyful and vibrant sense of being enters the hearts of the faithful, even through their suffering. They are less caught up in the dog-eat-dog world of the greedy, and more in love with the gifts of God.

Perhaps that is why Van Gogh, was able to revel in the natural beauty of nature around him, producing paintings filled with vibrant color and movement, in contrast to the painting of the women carrying coal. He was lone ranger, misunderstood, difficult, depressed, while at the same time reaching into the God-given possible, the beauty of God’s handiwork, in a sense, painting in partnership with the human condition and its pathway out of pain and into blessing.

No matter who you are, how rich you are or how poor, whether you live in the Western world, or whether you live in a remote spot out in the world, prince or pauper, settled or refugee, Jesus wants his disciples and God’s Church to hear a particular call to discipleship based on love for all God’s people with compassion for their circumstances.

Maybe you express that love and compassion through gifts that you acquire through particular interests that speak to you. Most importantly, we can all express that love and compassion by embracing the values of God’s kingdom that are very different from those of the world. It is not an easy order, but just as Jesus called his disciples to follow “now,” so we, too, are being called.

Jesus’ words are true and we, as the body of the faithful, can trust in how well God knows us, in every moment of our lives, in our better moments and our less-than-great moments. And that is good news indeed. It is these true words of Jesus that put the words of the world to shame.

We participate in this truth through what we offer in community we know as family, friends, worshipping and hearing the Scriptures together, offering service to God and God’s people through the sacrifice of our own time and above all, by entering into communion with Jesus through the sharing of bread and wine.

It is through this divine communion that we find ourselves rich in acceptance, rich in loving and joyous belonging, so much so that we can feel free to express ourselves just as we are, with truth and integrity, throwing off the dark and suffocating expectations of the world, covering it with our own version of painted flowers and fields, so that the woes of the world can never overcome what we know as God’s Kingdom.

We give thanks for all the Van Gogh’s who have and do suffer long and hard, misunderstood by the world and its woes, and yet beautifying it and offering it up as both a personal testament and a sacrifice to God. Surely these are to be blessed and, on the last day, all will be raised from the woes of the world.

Our God is a God for all people and especially for those who have nothing but God, which means every one of us, here and far away. The reality is we are all as vulnerable as the poorest of the poor and no matter how vast our possessions may be, none will be everlasting.

We have heard the truth from Jesus about what the faithful life of discipleship entails. We cannot say, after hearing his words today, that we weren’t warned.

Here is the poem that seems to capture the spirit of Jesus’ words to us today, while seeming to fit well in conversation with Van Gogh’s painting of the *Women Carrying Sacks of Coal in the Snow.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

 Those who carry grand pianos

 to the tenth floor

 wardrobes and coffins.

The old man with a bundle of wood hobbling toward the horizon

 the lady with a hump of nettles

 the madwoman pushing her baby carriage

 full of empty vodka bottles.

 They will all be raised up

 like a seagull’s feather

 like a dry leaf

 like an eggshell

 a scrap of newspaper on the street.

 Blessed are those who carry

 for they will be raised.

 *Anna Kamienska, Poland,1984*

Amen

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

February 23, 202

1. Vincent Van Gogh (Dutch 1853-1890) *Women Carrying Sacks of Coal in the Snow,* 1882, Chalk, brush in ink, and opaque and transparent watercolor on woven paper. Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)