Jesus – your words are a blessing, even when they’re hard. Speak that we may listen. Amen.

When I was a junior in Undergrad I had this English professor – well she was an English professor in training having nearly completed her Dissertation – and I don’t know but this almost professor (as I called her – I was 20) was convinced that I was a terrible writer and took every paper as an opportunity to tell me how terrible my writing was. I think her main critique was that I wrote about the characters as if they were real people, not figments of someone’s imagination. Fair critique – but if someone doesn’t want me to get lost in the particular quirks of a husband and wife who have fallen out of love then don’t write such compelling stories about them!

I remember going to her one day after class, explaining that she didn’t have to worry about how bad my writing was because everyone knows English majors are for people who still don’t know what they want to be when they grow up. Needless to say – that did not go over well and she promptly suggested that I switch majors. That whole semester I sweated every assignment… and then it happened. It clicked. I finally got how my very real (almost) professor was encouraging me to abandon what I had prematurely settled into as my writing style and helped me gain skills not only that I didn’t know I had… they were skills I didn’t even know I should want to have. How many of you can relate to this story? I bet every person in here has a story just like this – and if you don’t I hope one day you get one.

I don’t know why but there is magic in the rub. The rub is the thing that makes you uncomfortable, that thing that refuses to just let you quietly go about your day blissfully content. The rub… the pebble in the shoe…. The thing that just won’t let you shake the feeling that maybe, just maybe – you’re not perfect.

Jesus was the king of the rub. Jesus has a lot of honorific titles in our tradition– Lamb of God, Son of Man…. Maybe we should add ‘Rub Royalty’ in the mix too. This is something that Jesus is phenomenal at – the ultimate rub – the one who could and did in a mere 4 sentences invite us to wonder and question all that we have been taught about what makes a good life.

Just so you know ahead of time – I know sometimes preachers do this, sometimes I’ve done it – but this time we’re stuck. I have no smart exegetical tricks that get us out of Jesus’ Woe pronouncements. Trust me I tried… in my snooping I learned that the English woe is translated from the Greek Ouai – which is neither verb, nor noun but an interjection used to exclaim grief and it’s found all over Scripture. So if I want to get rid of all these Woes here and make them mean something less dire, I have to change the meaning of the word everywhere…

Nope we’re stuck. Stuck right here with Jesus saying

"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.

So what do we do? Any ideas?

I thought we could all nervously bite our nails… but then realized that won’t work since we’re mostly wearing masks. So what do we do with this passage – we can’t explain it away? We could try to bury it – Christians have been known to do that – everyone here has heard of the Sermon on the Mount… How many of you have heard the phrase “Sermon on the Plain”… that’s right not as many – cause this is the less popular twin because on the plain Jesus doesn’t spiritualize anything – there’s no blessed are the poor in Spirit – in Luke’s telling Blessed are the poor. Period.

So what do we do? I think we say thank you. Jesus needed to say these words and we needed to have Jesus on record as having said these words more than we realize.

I have no idea whether Jesus knew that Christianity would become the religion of Empire. He was fully God so maybe. But he was also fully human so maybe not. That’s above my pay grade. But we all know that Christianity became the religion of empire. And from where we now sit – and what we now know, we must acknowledge that everything that Jesus warned his disciples to be wary of, many in the historic, institutional church ran to with open arms. The Church became rich, famously, exploitively so. The Church became full – gluttonous to the point of embarrassing. I don’t know whether one can say the church became a place of laughter… maybe that’s the one injunction they took to heart...

Here we stand - after centuries of Christian exploitation, greed, and abuse… we never lost Jesus. No matter how often the church participated in a scheme that exploited the rich to aid the poor, *we never lost Jesus*… Jesus words stood firm –quietly illuminating the deficiencies and lies that were swirling around in his name.

Over the past couple of months I’ve been reading Marie Arana’s *Silver, Sword & Stone* – a comprehensive telling of the conquest of Latin America. Throughout the book there is tragedy after tragedy, violence upon violence. And while the violence and exploitation in Latin America, did not begin with the arrival of the Christian Conquistadors, story after story reveals that the Christians escalated the violence and horrors once the continent and her people were under their total control. At one point I was close to tears – furious that these Christians tried to make Jesus complicit in their horrors... But then it dawned on me how badly they failed. Here I am a child of that conquest – enamored by Jesus still because he speaks hard words that I can’t make go away. Words that stick to my bones, illuminate the hypocrisies I participate in and invites me to dream a bigger, more expansive dream. I’m smart – I know the history - I should be rejecting Jesus – yet here I affirming with my life and in this time that I don’t understand all Jesus had to say, but I want to.

A large part of that has to do with Jesus uttering these few dark sentences on rather boring topography.

No, I don’t like hearing Jesus dismiss riches, food, laughter and flattery… who does? These words rub me the wrong way and I don’t like it… but they’re exactly the kind of rub everyone in the world would do well to contend with every once in a while. And that, well that is why I’m thankful for them this day. Amen.