

If you're anything like me, for the last week or so you have been glued as nonstop as possible to the Winter Olympics. No matter what sport it is from curling to figure skating, snowboarding to biathlon, I am completely fascinated by the amount of skill and talent it takes to compete at the level these athletes bring to the ice and snow. It seems like every iteration of the Olympics brings me a new form of fascination with one sport or another, and this year, I have been completely entranced by skiing. The sheer velocity with which these skiers hurtle themselves down these mountains just entirely blows my mind and terrifies me all at once. But one of the things that has fascinated me more than anything about these ski events is...time.

Why in the world is time fascinating in skiing? Because the tiniest, slimmest fraction of time makes all the difference on these Olympic mountains. The story that highlights this for me more than anything was the men's downhill skiing event this year. There were stories throughout about skiers who had missed bygone Olympic podiums by mere tenths of a second, but then...a new story was added to the annals of Winter Olympic history. Swiss skier Beat Feuz flew down the mountain in 1 minute 42.69 seconds. He was ecstatic. He had never won this event at the Olympics before and that time seemed fairly unbeatable...and it was...just barely. Because you

see, the silver medal was claimed by Johan Clarey from France, a 41-year old skier who became the oldest Alpine Olympic medalist in history. Clarey descended the mountain in 1 minute 42.79 seconds. *A tenth of a second.* That was the margin between silver and gold in this event. That's practically just a snap of your fingers, the difference between whether or not you were leaning like an inch further ahead than your opponent when crossing the finish line. *A tenth of a second.* It's barely a margin. It's a sliver. It's not a gap. It's not a blowout. It's squeaking past your opponent with practically the most minimal amount possible. You want to talk about winning by the skin of your teeth? That's what happened here.

Gaps matter, whether in sports or in life. Sometimes those gaps are massive, sometimes they are so miniscule they don't even deserve to be called gaps. The distance between one group and another sometimes makes all the difference, and sometimes those differences aren't just a matter of gold or silver, but can on occasion be the difference between life and death, between blessing and woe.

Our gospel probably sounds familiar and yet different to your ears. You think you can quote Jesus verbatim until some small change happens and it causes your words to stumble. Because the thing is while we have heard the Beatitudes a thousand times before, more often than not we hear

those words from *Matthew*, and here, we hear them from Luke, and Luke's version is just a little bit different. One could even say there's a gap, a fairly large one in fact between Matthew's sermon and Luke's sermon from Jesus. They don't even happen in the same place. Whereas in Matthew this teaching happens with Jesus on a mountainside preaching down to a vast crowd and speaking to his disciples by pointing to the crowds down below, a sermon on the mount, Luke finds Jesus in a field, with crowds all around, preaching to the disciples by gesturing to the crowds that surround them at eye level, who are right there with them, a sermon on the plain. I'm totally stealing this from someone in Bible study but in some ways this sermon should have just started with Jesus being like, "Ok, let me level with you here." Because for Jesus in this version of his sermon, he wants to make one thing clear, where there are gaps, there shouldn't be. Where some are above and some are below, the world needs to change. We all need to get on the same level, the playing field desperately needs to be evened.

Location, however, isn't the biggest difference between Matthew and Luke here. The biggest difference is in content. We're so used to hearing blessed are the poor in spirit, then when Jesus stops here at blessed are the poor, we think he's forgotten the words. But he hasn't. No. Luke has more practical concerns than issues of the spirit for the people surrounding Jesus.

In Luke, Jesus is far, far more concerned about what is going on in the physical lives of his listeners. In Luke, Jesus is far, far more concerned about oppression and economics. And maybe that makes us a little uncomfortable to hear Jesus speaking so boldly and blatantly about issues of society, but we need to ask ourselves why we're uncomfortable with that in order to figure out what this gospel is saying to us today, and I think the answer to that question lies in the issue of...gaps.

But before we get there, let's look a little bit more at what Jesus is saying here. Who is Jesus saying are the blessed ones here? The poor, literally the ones with no money, no means, no ability to support themselves in a world rife with economic disparity and oppression. The hungry, literally the ones with hungry bellies and perpetual questions of how they are going to put food on the table for their loved ones in a world with little opportunity for societal advancement. Those who weep, not just those who mourn, who are mired in the pain of grief, but all of those who weep for whatever it is that is causing them pain. Everyone who shed tears in a world rife with reasons to cry is who is blessed in Jesus' sermon. But it begs the question if they are the ones who are blessed, then who are the ones that aren't? And unlike Matthew, Luke has an answer to that question.

Woe to those who are rich. Woe to those who are full. Woe to those who laugh. It makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it? Jesus just laying out there for all to hear that the kingdom he has come to bring doesn't show favor to those who have it all, it doesn't benefit those in power, it doesn't celebrate those who have made it. In fact, it does the exact opposite. Now, here's the thing, is Jesus saying being wealthy is bad? That having food on your table is bad? That experiencing joy in life is bad? No. That's not what Jesus is saying. What he's saying is...woe to those who rest content in the midst of oppression. Woe to those who are idly happy when the world around them is on fire. It isn't your wealth, your food, your laughter that brings you woe, it is when you enjoy those things in willful ignorance that anyone else in the world experiences anything different. It brings woe when you point to those things as reasons for why you're better than those who don't have what you have. It brings woe when you use those things to place yourself on a mountain above others instead of using them to help level the playing field.

Now here's the thing, we're human, and so our instinct is to hear these words of Jesus and point to all of the reasons why they don't apply to us. We immediately want to say, uh huh, that Jeff Bezos, he's a billionaire and he's spending all of his money on space expeditions. Ok, sure, that's true.

But how many of us have ordered from Amazon in the last week? I have. A couple times. How many of us don't even think twice about whether our bank account can afford that order? We immediately want to point to these people with lavish, industrial kitchens who never use them but instead eat out every night and can afford a nice bottle of wine with each meal. Ok, sure that's true too. But how many of us have bemoaned that we're *hungry* when our cupboards are literally full of a world of options? How many of us can generally go out to eat whenever we want without much concern beyond the caloric intake? We immediately want to point to those who shut off the news or ignore the world around them and laugh because everything is perfect in their world? Ok, sure, that's true too. But how many of us...do the exact same thing?

How many of us pray that the light will turn green, so we don't have to stop in front of our neighbor holding a sign saying they're in need? How many of us wonder why people just won't do something with their lives instead of taking advantage of those of us who *earned* our keep? How many of us wish people would stop talking about things like race and prejudice and discriminatory laws because my goodness why do we have to keep talking about it all of the time? Or at least couldn't they protest and speak out in a more comfortable manner? Why can't they find joy in what they

have as opposed to constantly whining about what has happened to them?

Any of that sound familiar? I would dare to say that most of us would answer a very uncomfortable yes to most of those things, because the reality is, the gap between us and someone like Jeff Bezos isn't as vast as we would like it to be when it comes to our willingness and desire to care for others.

On the mountain of life, most of us are going to be closer to the comfortable middle to top of the heap as opposed to near the bottom and we want nothing to do with an even playing field that puts us on the level with *those people*.

This gospel dares us to take a deep, honest look in the mirror and ask where our gaps are, not just in comparison to those around us, but where our gaps are when it comes to loving and serving our neighbor. Where are our gaps when it comes to compassion and willingly seeing the world around us for what it is, a place where some of our siblings do not have a chance without our help. Where are our gaps when it comes to listening to the gospel and daring to let it impact our lives and call us to change? Where are our gaps when it comes to hearing Jesus' words and taking them seriously in how we live our lives? On some things, maybe our gap is miniscule, a mere tenth of a second, but more often than not I think are gaps are made up of seconds upon seconds, and it is high time that we stop lagging behind and

dare to catch up so that we can make a world where we all have the opportunity to cross the finish line at the same time. **AMEN!!!**