

Panera Bread used to have these cafes called Panera Cares.

The idea was that it was a pay-what-you-could kind of restaurant.

There were prices on the menu, but there were no cash registers.

You'd simply order your food and put your money in a container on the counter, as much as you cared to pay.

The business model was that the people who could afford to pay the expected price, would, or they'd even pay more, and that would compensate for those who paid less.

You could also volunteer for 1 hour per week and earn a meal voucher, if you couldn't pay for your food.

At one point, there were 5 of the Panera Cares cafes around the country.

There is only 1 left, which is in Boston, but it will be closing its doors soon as well.

Why didn't the cafes work out?

Well, the long story short is that people who could afford to pay for their food didn't want to dine at a restaurant that attracted a lot of homeless people.

As one article said, *"[At the restaurant], you would see all of these shopping carts around, which also smelled in addition to the*

people themselves. And so the managers had to come up with rules about the size of bags that you could bring in...

What ended up happening is the people who were not food insecure did not want to eat lunch with people who were food

insecure.” (“What Happened When Panera Launched a ‘Pay What You Can’ Experiment, www.npr.org. Jan. 24, 2019.)

While this outcome saddens me, it doesn't surprise me.

I get the sense that there is nothing more shameful in our country than being poor.

We can be sick, mentally or physically, we can have kids that act out, we can have loved ones who don't act quite right, we can mess up at work and get bad grades, we can do all the things wrong, and people extend a kind of graciousness to us.

But in our nation, it is not acceptable to be poor.

People go to great lengths to disguise their poverty.

Being poor is seen as a moral failing, a character flaw.

There must be something wrong with you if you cannot support yourself or your family.

In fact, I have found that families know basically everything about each other, but they have no idea how much money or how much debt their other family members have.

We simply don't talk about it.

Aside from the fact that I think this is unhealthy for our society, it's completely counter to the Gospel message.

Treating poverty as a sin is unchristian.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor," he wasn't talking about spiritual poverty.

He was talking about real, material, financial poverty.

We have tried to spiritualize it perhaps to distance ourselves from the hard truth that Jesus did give preferential treatment to those who were poor.

When he says, "Blessed are you," perhaps a better way of understanding it is, "Honorable are you."

He was trying to destigmatize being poor.

In verse 22, he says, *"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man."*

He says this because that's how poor people were treated in his day, they were hated, excluded, reviled, outcast.

He's standing among the people, on a plain, speaking to them directly, saying, you are blessed, you are honorable, those of you who are hated and defiled and excluded.

You will receive your reward.

Jesus talks about money, finances and poverty more than anything else in his ministry.

He tells his followers that it's easier for the camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into the kingdom of heaven.

He tells the rich man to go, sell all he has, give the money to the poor and then follow him.

In the parable of the wedding banquet, he tells his followers, *"when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* (Luke 14: 3-14)

When Jesus began his ministry, he was in the temple and he unrolled the scroll and read from the prophet Isaiah.

Of all the things he could have read from the Hebrew Bible, he chose the passage that said, *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.'* (Luke 4: 18)

And we can't forget who taught him these values, his mom, Mary.

In her famous song that we heard just a few months ago during Advent, she said, *"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."* (Luke 1: 52-53).

I believe that God has a preferential love for the poor not because they're better than others or because there's some kind of spiritual superiority in being poor, but because they're simply living in an inhumane situation that is contrary to God's will.

And I believe Jesus is carrying out God's will by tending to those with the greatest needs.

In Jesus' time, as it is still in ours, those with the greatest needs were often those who were poor.

At the very beginning of this Gospel, Luke writes an introduction.

The first few verses sound go like this, "*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us...*

³I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,

⁴so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed." (Luke 1: 1, 3-4)

The reason this is important is because of the man who was mentioned, Theophilus.

Luke's Gospel is written to him, and he's a very, very rich man, but we don't know much else about him.

All we know is that he's of high social standing, possibly one of the non-Jewish, Gentile converts to Christianity, so he's being instructed in the way of Christ.

Thinking about Jesus' sermon being directed towards a rich person helps us to reframe it a little bit.

He does not mince his words.

Just as "Blessed are you," could be understood as 'honorable are you,'

"Woe to you," could be understood as 'shameless are you.'

Shameless are you who are rich, for you have received your consolation, shameless are you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Luke is telling Theophilus through Jesus' sermon that if he wants to be part of this Christian community, he needs to rid himself of his wealth, because he won't be welcome otherwise.

Now, I don't think our community should be exclusionary towards those who are wealthy.

We say that all are welcome, all are loved, that means everyone, no matter where you land on the economic spectrum.

However. I do think we should be actively working to destigmatize poverty, so that we disentangle it from the association that it's something to be ashamed of.

Being poor is hard enough, feeling ashamed because one is poor just makes life even harder.

I see it in our own community though.

People are eager to donate to the Deacon's Fund, but do you know how hard it is to give people money from the Deacon's Fund?

Everyone thinks someone else needs it, I don't need it, I will be fine, I am not really struggling.

I have heard this many times.

Or People Helping People, do you know how much of an emphasis is placed on maintaining confidentiality?

We cannot speak about who the pantry clients are or who receives financial support from the basic needs fund, as if there's something embarrassing about needing to access the food pantry.

The truth is that many, many people are living paycheck to paycheck.

You might not consider yourself poor, but if you couldn't go without one or two paychecks, then you are one step away from poverty.

We saw it just recently with the government shutdown.

While the shutdown itself was appalling, I was horrified by how many people found themselves in dire straits because of missing one paycheck.

After all, the latest buzz statistic in our nation is that 40% of adults couldn't come up with \$400 for an emergency.

That's one emergency away from poverty.

I think we desperately need to unmask the stigma around being poor because it is preventing us from truly being in community with one another.

If we don't know what our needs are, we don't know how to support each other, and then we can't fully extend God's love to one another.

I hope that we can be a congregation in which we feel safe enough to disclose all that we are, rich, poor, and everything in between, so that we can be a community which lives out Jesus' teachings as best we are able.

Amen.