

Sunday, July 11, 2021

Dropping the Mask Sue Jung Grant

In my Monday-through-Friday life, I am a marketing professor at Boston University. I teach marketing strategy, marketing research, pricing, and a little bit about advertising. My research interests are in consumer behavior. I have taught for over 20 years, thousands of students. One of the aspects of my job is grading. I do it a lot. Semester after semester.

I sometimes think about if I were grading Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount, I know what I'd say. "Jesus, you are doing it all wrong. Forgive me for saying so, but your messaging – and possibly your segmentation – is lacking."

Segmentation looks at the segments of people in the market who might be interested in the product. I'd recommend starting with a segment with promise – disposable income, influential, connected. Then craft the messaging in a manner that is appropriate to the target.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit?" That is not a great start.

"Blessed are those who mourn?" No better.

"Blessed are the meek?" Getting worse.

In my imaginary conversation, I would counsel Jesus: "The issue with the messaging is that it has to land on the audience like a Netflix show, a compelling story with wit and clarity. And to fashion a message that does so, we must understand the target audience. What is important to the audience? What will resonate?"

"Jesus, you must not understand that the target audience may not be interested in hearing that the meek, the mournful, and the poor in spirit are inheriting the earth. Surely we can think of another way to resonate with your target market."

All snarkiness aside, I need to tell you that although I have encountered these words since childhood, I had not the foggiest idea what these words meant. They were a puzzle wrapped in a paradox. Why would the meek, the poor in spirit, and the humble be rewarded? This made little sense to me as a Catholic school girl growing up in Youngstown, Ohio.

In fact, despite attending 11 years of Catholic school and attending Mass every Sunday, my experience with church did little to relieve my sense of disconnectedness.

I have always felt I was an outsider.

My parents and I had immigrated from South Korea to Youngstown, in the 1960s, and I remember vividly feeling like an oddity. I worked hard to notice what characteristics were valued. I was raised to believe that achievement, accomplishment, and status were important to gird myself against the struggles of being an outsider. And so I did my best to excel and achieve. Once I entered college, I left behind any curiosity about Christianity, adopting the scholarly ethos that science, empiricism, and logic were the only way to know truth.

For more than 30 years, I believed church had nothing for me, and God had nothing to say to me. In this season of life, I am forced to reconsider this set of premises.

When our family moved from Colorado to Massachusetts nine years ago, I nurtured a façade. Coming from Boulder, I took a job offer in Boston, what looked like a step up. But the whole truth was that a senior professor who had arrived in Boulder from a prestigious university told me he would not support me for tenure at the University of Colorado, where I had been working. And my colleagues – who were also my friends – sided with him. To be refused tenure means to be removed.

My heart was shattered in a million pieces. Again, I was an outsider, and all my protections – my education, my degrees, my accomplishments –

were useless. I was in mourning. I was the picture of poor in spirit. I was rendered meek.

In my misery, I turned to psychotherapy, yoga, a Costa Rican retreat hosted by Hare Krishnans. A friend suggested I file a lawsuit. One yogi told me: "The heart is the only organ in the human body that works better after it's broken." I read Joseph Campbell, who famously said "we must let go of the life we have planned to accept the one that is waiting for us." I had questions.

When we left Colorado and arrived in Boston, what gave me comfort in those early days was my work with students. I swallowed my profound disappointment and heartbreak. I focused on students, who were trying to find their own place in the world. Maybe they were struggling academically, maybe they were questioning their fit at the business school, maybe they were first-generation students, maybe they were immigrants and they felt the weight of their parents' sacrifice. I loved them. I loved what they shared with me. I loved helping them to see that their human contribution to the world far outweighed a mediocre exam grade. And even though I was the instructor, I was also the student.

In resettling our family from the Rocky Mountain West, my husband and I eventually visited Wellesley Village Church. We sought for our boys, then 6 and 8, a community that instilled a foundation of values, a spiritual spine, and an orientation toward others. In recent years, what I wanted for our boys has had ever growing meaning for me.

From the point of view of my own personal journey, admittedly in its infancy, what makes Christian theology a radical revelation is its proposition that salvation doesn't come from a mighty warrior but from the heart-breaking defeat of a teacher and rabbi.

But as people who fear vulnerability, we want a warrior, a conqueror, a winner. We want Tom Brady. But maybe what we need is more humility.

The words, “the meek will inherit the earth” have new meaning for me. I understand why the poor in spirit shall enter the kingdom of God. These are not pre-conditions of salvation. They are the ways in which we access our own divinity.

I believe we realize our true power when we serve, when we yield, when we soften, and when we love. This is a lesson Wellesley Village Church has taught me over and over.

- Our pastors, who set an example of a love so vast, it seems unreasonable. They sit with us to hear our broken stories and walk with us in our sorrow and see the best in us.
- So many in our congregation, who refuse to accept human limits as they deliver relief. By their imagination, they inspire the rest of us.
- And all of the faithful, who step up to whisper a prayer, to belt out a hymn, to bring a dish, who step up to fill the communion thimbles with grape juice, to light a candle, to pass the peace, to weep for our dead. We are all elevated by these simple and humble acts of devotion.

Recently on a trip to California, I met up last month with my friend Amy from college who recently experienced a bitter divorce, which cost her dearly – her relationship with her teen-age daughter. She shared with me her experience and did not pass up a single opportunity to speak about the evils of her ex-husband, someone I consider a dear friend. She asked me if I had talked with him. I hesitated but said yes, I had. She bristled and told me I couldn’t be friends with her AND her ex-husband. I could feel the steel-toe boot in her tone. I would have to choose.

What could I say? She was fiery in her anger. And then it came to me: “Amy, I care about you. I love you. I want the best for you.” In that moment, I felt an unmistakable shift. By letting myself soften into the moment, I was able to change our interaction.

The eight beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, though I’ve encountered this reading many times since I was a child, has new meaning for me, meaning that eluded me. I understand now that we can

achieve knowledge not just through the mind, but also through the heart and the body.

I realize now: What church has to offer me was not available to me when I was younger. It was not the time. My ears were not ready for hearing the message of the Christian paradox.

In giving, we receive. In softening, we find strength. In facing death, we know life.

I understand this is the time for me.