

Speaker 1:

Good morning. Herodotus of Halicarnassus 130:32, translated by AD Godley, with my own adaptations, abbreviations and glosses.

When the Athenian lawmaker, Solon, got to Sardis, King Croesus of Lydia entertained him in the palace. And on the third or fourth day, Croesus told his attendance to show Solon around his treasures, and they pointed out all those things that were great and blessed. After Solon had seen everything and had thought about it, Croesus found the opportunity to say, "My Athenian guest, we have heard a lot about you because of your wisdom and of your wonderings. So now, I desire to ask you, who is the most blessed person you have seen?" Croesus asked this question believing that he was the most blessed of people, but Solon, offering no flattery but keeping to the truth, shared his first choice, and then his second, ordinary Greeks who had been moderately fortunate in life and who died abruptly after performing a notable community service.

Croesus flew off the handle and said, "My Athenian guest, do you so much despise our happiness that you do not even make us worth as much as ordinary man?" Solon's response was to calculate an average lifespan, highlighting the myriad opportunities for something to go wrong right up to the moment of death. He concludes, "It's impossible for a mere human to obtain all measures of happiness, success and good fortune at the same time, just as no land is self-sufficient in what it produces. Each land has one thing but lacks another. Whichever has the most is the most blessed. Just so, no human is self-sufficient. Each person has one thing but lacks another. Whoever passes through life with the most and then dies happily is the one who, in my opinion, oh, king, deserves to be called blessed. It is necessary to see how the end of everything turns out, for the God promises fortune to many people and then utterly ruins them."

There's a lot going on here, but I can't get out of my head Croesus's crushing disappointment on not winning a competition in being most blessed, for goodness' sake. I can't get out of my head Croesus's expectation that he should win every contest, his hovering over Solon's version of, "And the winner is..." Not you, Croesus. "And the runner up is..." Not you, Croesus. So when something from antiquity resonates with me personally, I try a three-step process, so let's do that together now.

Step one is the easy one. Does Croesus remind you of anyone with his need to win every competition and his rage when he does not? 1, 2, 3. I bet you can easily think of an obnoxious egotist or two, someone out there. I'll leave it to you. Step two, harder. Can you think of someone you've loved very much who has that side to them? I think of my dad, Jeff Dench, whom I loved so much. He did pretty well by Solon's standards of good fortune, but his talent as a Shakespearean stage actor was also a thorn in his side. It's really hard for actors to escape the desire to win, to be the most blasted, the leading role, Hollywood fame, holding your breath for, "And the winner is..." And to top it all, for Jeff, a little sister, Judy, who won time and time again. My dad's rage came out when he got news of his next season's roles just before rehearsals began, exploding, "More coffin spit parts." His code for nothing worth doing. So much life sapping frustration.

But he was much, much more than an angry Croesus, and I do believe that at the end, he would've been okay with the tributes he received after his death, like this one: "Jeffrey was the kind of actor that made the RSC what it is. He did not necessarily always play the leading roles, but proved by his presence that the company's vitality lies in its strength and depth."

Now, for step three, are you ready? Have you ever been Croesus, or is there just a bit of Croesus in you? That rage, that disappointment in not winning? Because I have. Academics are conditioned like actors to win from childhood. I think I was seven or eight when I first realized that it would be a big deal if I didn't come top, spelling tests, little exams. Those expectations mount as the competition gets stiffer and

more consequential, and if you don't check it, that competition never ends, even, and especially, at Harvard. You might have tenure and a name, chair, but where's your MacArthur? Your Pulitzer? Your Nobel Prize? Or for Britts like me, where's your knighthood?

It's good to say it out loud in all its ridiculousness, to laugh at the Croesus inside of us, and make him say goodbye once and for all. The stakes are extraordinarily high because that crease of spirit inhibits our joy and satisfaction, the love we can give and receive, the good we can do, the good we can be. And above all, the much bigger, much more important than us individually, things that we can contribute to, each in our own small but significant way. Thank you.

Speaker 4:

Please rise in body and spirit for prayer.

God of love and grace, we thank you for bringing us together on this cold, sunny morning, meeting us however we are in this moment. Help us know, knighted or not, we are already loved, already worthy, already whole. Amen.

And please join me in the Lord's prayer saying, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it's in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever amen.

And now, let us sing the hymn, Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy. Number 81.

(singing)

Now, as we prepare to leave this place, may the peace of God be in your hearts, the love of God be in your hands, the joy of God be in your soul. Go in peace. Amen.