

**February 17, 2019 Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan**  
**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 6:17-26**

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the sixth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>17</sup>[Jesus] came down with [the twelve] and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.<sup>18</sup>They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup>And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

<sup>20</sup>Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup>“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup>“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

<sup>24</sup>“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup>“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.

<sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

The gospel of the Lord

## **Praise to you, O Christ.**

The gospel of the Lord, indeed. The good news of God.

We say, "Praise to you, O Christ," when those words are pronounced...and ...sometimes I wonder how much we mean it. Sometimes what has come just before that proclamation that this is "good news" is unsettling at best... The good news? "Woe to you who are rich...who are full...who are laughing...Woe to you when people speak well of you..."

"Blessed are you who are poor...hungry...grieving...unregarded...persecuted..."

I don't know. I'm not sure where I even want to be in the middle of all that. I don't want "woe"... but none of that stuff that comes with being blessed sounds very good, either. One of the questions we often ask in our Godly Play room is, "Where are you in this story?"

That is something I wonder when Jesus says words like these. Where are we in this story? What is Jesus offering us today? Blessings? Or woes? Or maybe... both...?

I'm not sure how well we understand the idea of blessing. Maybe you understand it better than I do, I don't know. But I struggle...because on facebook and Instagram we might say we are #blessed when we post a picture of a beautiful sunset, a gift, a precious moment with a person we love. So being #blessed starts to look like it means moments of happiness and joy.

I think we may imagine our blessings as gifts from God – moments and parts of our lives that you can tie up in a beautiful bow or capture in a photograph.

But I'm not sure I can make peace with that. Because if God doles out gifts of love or the beauty of nature like little presents or prizes to bring us joy, how

can we make sense of the moments when we are lonely and broken and joyless? Has God stopped blessing us? Have we stopped being worthy?

The first place I remember that my very stunted understanding of blessing was challenged was when I worked in Minneapolis as a receptionist at a large church downtown.

There was an early morning ritual of greeting I exchanged with folks there. It took me a long time to get used to it. Because I didn't really understand it. Maybe I'm still learning to.

In the morning, when only the security guard, facilities staff, and I were on campus ...when it was just the few of us opening up shop for the morning... members of the neighborhood community would also be coming in for coffee. They would pass by my desk on their way to the Fellowship Hall. They'd say good morning...ask how I was doing today. I'd say I was "fine, thanks"...and how were they? So often, I got the response, "I'm blessed."

And I tell you what...I didn't know where to put that. Maybe because I couldn't see what looked like blessing in the lives of folks who came in for crummy church coffee with powdered creamer on cold Minnesota mornings because they didn't have a home or work or family they could spend their time with instead. I think I also didn't know where to put something that felt that emotionally intimate...and I think our cultural differences were sometimes a part of that.

I also don't know if I ever learned the right way to respond to that pronouncement. Perhaps I didn't need to...and part of my discomfort was in the fact that it was a proclamation that did not require my ratification for the proclaimer to live in its truth.

But that was the answer every morning...a sort of prophecy over the day: "How are you?" "I'm blessed."

I think I might finally be starting to learn what it means.

You see, in Luke today...Jesus is preaching his most substantial sermon. A sermon that Matthew says is situated on a mountain...but Luke shows us happening on a level place...a plain.

Jesus is preaching about blessing in the very midst of a broken and hurting world...not high above it at all...but in the middle of life, exactly as it is. Jesus is fulfilling the words of Isaiah that were echoed by John the Baptist as Luke's gospel began...God is appearing where mountains are made low and valleys are raised up...on a level place. This is the way of the Lord that John prepared for us. Now we are experiencing it.

And Jesus tells how those living in the midst of great brokenness – hunger and poverty, grief and persecution...are blessed. And those who are rich, and full of good food, who laugh and are highly regarded...they are the ones who should be sad...Woe is theirs.

This is God turning everything upside down, as Mary's song prophesied and promised.

And as I've thought of this...and thought of my own comfortable life...and the lives of my friends in the Fellowship Hall of Central Lutheran Church...I've begun to form a different way of understanding what blessing really is. What if blessing is connection...to God (perhaps also to one another...though that may be the same thing sometimes)...? And woe is when those connections are broken, so often by our own choices?

What would blessings and woes look like today? Really, they could be exactly the same...because, sadly, nothing in Jesus' words is actually outdated after two thousand years.

That said, I took a stab at a contemporary list...you might imagine a slightly different one, and that's fine. But this was my attempt:

*Blessed are you who are the victims of gun violence,*

*for your blood is priceless to God.  
Blessed are you who have been abused,  
for your body is more sacred than the churches and leaders  
who have failed to hear and honor you.  
Blessed are you who are lonely  
or don't fit into the cookie cutters  
of perfect roses-and-chocolates-relationships,  
because God wants to hang out with you the most.  
Blessed are you when you are bullied or belittled  
for not fitting into people boxes and expectations...  
Rejoice and be glad...  
because those boxes were invented by people, not God...  
and the people who made them  
are the ones who are stuck in something small and lifeless.*

*But woe to you if you are safe  
or think you are safe from everything in the world that could hurt you,  
because you take things that don't belong to you  
to build your false sense of security.  
Woe to you if you rest in your safety while victims of abuse or violence suffer,  
for your own soul is being harmed when any of your siblings are in pain...  
and someday the numbness will wear off and you will feel it.  
Woe to you if your heart hasn't been broken...  
because it will be one day...and it will hurt so much.  
Woe to you if you have always been one of the cool kids...  
because you have kept your place at the table  
by being complicit in the suffering of others.  
And you have missed out on the beautiful rainbow of humanity and love  
that lives beyond the fear of being good enough  
for the people who act like they get to decide who's good enough.*

What if blessings aren't packages tied up with bows...but the arcs of love that connect us to God and each other? Jesus wants us to know today...that when we are in the lowest and loneliness and most desolate places...God's love is reaching out to us, embracing us...holding us. When my friends told me they

were blessed...they were proclaiming God's care for them in a world that didn't look like it cared much at all...and maybe even in defiance of anyone who was looking for a picture-perfect image of blessing.

And those of us who build up stories of our own self-sufficiency, who are trying to rest in the comfort of the security we have built for ourselves...who are laughing for that picture perfect moment to post for everyone to see and like and share...We may find we are building walls between the connections we need most.

I noticed in reading these blessings and woes...that there is not a dividing line drawn here between the people who do good enough things to deserve blessing on one side and those who don't on another. If there is a line, it is one we draw for ourselves. And so it is less about the difference between deserving blessing and not...and more about trusting God more than ourselves...holding out our hands to accept the love we do not have to earn. If blessing is an expression of closeness to God...then the irony is that we realize we have it the moment we stop trying to build a wall with blessedness and everyone on the other side. We have it the moment we stop trying to act like it's something we must earn. Blessing is something that is given not when we earn it, but when we need it.

And that doesn't mean that everything becomes picture perfect in that moment of receiving it. We are still on that level plain...in the middle of a world of suffering and brokenness. And we are broken, too. And when we are the fortunate ones, we can't rest in our comfort, because we have work to do. And through everything... we are not alone. Not one of God's precious children is. Because God is with us. And we are blessed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.