

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
16 February 2025

Luke 6:17-26

Today's Gospel gives us a message of reversal. Most of the conditions people consider a curse, a tragedy, a punishment from God, or simply bad luck, are turned around and described as a source of blessing, if and when those conditions happen as a result of someone choosing to follow Christ. Let us talk about context. This passage today closes a section of Luke that began with Jesus' preaching in his hometown synagogue. This early ministry section has been filled with miraculous healing, challenging teaching, opposition, and the gathering of twelve apostles. Today, in his famous sermon on the plain, Jesus will say that:

The poor belong to God
The hungry will be filled
The sick will be healed
Those weeping will be filled with joy,
(which remind us of Isaiah saying, "Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.")

God's blessings will be freely given to those on the margins, those excluded by the world, those who are reviled and defamed because of their allegiance to Jesus. Those who are cut off from their village, family, work, synagogue, or community because of Jesus belong to God and will be blessed by God. In fact, the passage makes the assertion that these people are in good company because many of their ancestors, who were God's mouthpiece in their generations, were also defamed and abused. Think for example of the prophets, some of the judges, even some of the kings. Therefore, those who suffer today are in the communion of the ancestors who suffered because they were faithful to God's call for their life.

The blessings Jesus announces are not just theological constructs. He offers real promises for this world and this life: the material needs of the poor will be supplied for, God will send his abundant healing into the world to comfort and cure those who are ill, those who suffered will be comforted, those who are captive will be freed, etc. These are real solutions to real problems and not just a promise that their lives will be so much better in heaven when they die. This is particularly important to me because I grew up at a time and culture where preachers would often say: "Suffer little children, work 15-hour days without overtime and offer your

tiredness as a sacrifice to God, don't oppose your bosses, obey the Church in everything you do... because your reward will be great in heaven." The formula was simple: We were to become comfortable with suffering because one day Scottie would beam up to a city with streets of gold. (Reference to Star Trek).

But Jesus in Luke offers real, concrete solutions, and I suggest that God in Christ was building a community of brothers and sisters that would make a reality these promises of Christ. The Church is the community in the love of God whose job it is to feed, to love the outcast, to clothe the naked, and to work for the needs of the disenfranchised. God acts in the life of the believers both directly (prayer works) and through the loving actions of the Church.

Jesus affirms that the world ultimately belongs to God and God will provide for it. All would-be "lords" and "leaders", (A theologian I have read calls them "extractors") will ultimately fail. Let me give you as example the wealthiest man on earth right now. It is likely that someday he will be the first trillionaire, and the first dual trillionaire, and perhaps even the first tri-trillionaire, and then he will die. That's it! He will die and he will not get to take any of it with him. We admire and envy him and others like him, but they will never love and care for the world the way God loves the world. They are extractors, only the Lord cares and loves the fullness of creation.

Luke's blessings go beyond the material to cover the emotional and the spiritual as well. God will change our experience of death, replacing our fear and tears with deep joy. In fact, as Isaiah announces, "God will wipe all tears from our faces." The greatest anxiety we have is existential anxiety: the awareness and fear of our own future death. But the beatitudes make it clear that God will replace this fear with deep joy and hope. The worse the persecution and defaming becomes for the followers of Jesus, the more pronounced God's blessings for those who suffer for Christ's sake will be. God's mouthpieces will be secure because they belong to Jesus and God blesses his children. Their identity, self-worth, and status lies with God, the source of all healing and power.

Sadly, many of us don't really trust this message. When we think about God's blessings, we automatically transport our minds to Heaven, another world in which we will have ice-cream for breakfast if we want to. We look at our poverty or the poverty of others with deep sadness. When our character is assassinated because of our allegiance to Christ, we feel hopeless and deeply wounded. And the only hope we have is in a world beyond the stars. But Jesus' promises are meant for today, for this world, for our current reality, for our Church of today. God promises that we

will be filled, that we will laugh, that we will discover our truest identity in Christ, that we will be freed from the fears that afflict our hearts.

But we say, “I just want the status quo the world has to offer. I don’t want the sacrifices involved in being a Christian. I want a different path. I want to place my hope on the Empire. I want the confidence wealth has to offer me. I want to find my happiness in the Epicurean excesses that want me to ‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow I will die.’ I want to suck the marrow out of life, even if I have to be on the side of evil from time to time, even if I exploit others, even if I act with great selfishness. I want to be on the side of winners. There are some many losers in church! I want respect, fame, and adoration. I want to be seen!”

Today, Jesus tells us that these are the wrong priorities. Life does not consist of the abundance of our possessions. Life is about God’s provision in Jesus of Nazareth. God’s provisions are trustworthy, even if the world throws poverty, hunger, grief, and rejection our way. We can trust Jesus to provide. This provision offers a life that is more connected to God and others, more in tune with nature, more interdependent of community, a better existence than just building barns to hoard our grain. We could have tens of thousands of barns, filled to capacity with grain, and still feel captive, obsessed, without peace, hopeless. Just think about the large number of wealthy and famous people who commit suicide every year. The stories are abundant in the media and in our communities. We could have extraordinary fame and recognition and still feel alone, isolated, empty, unloved and unwanted. We can have it all and feel extremely poor.

But a life lived for Christ always leads to fulfillment, even in the face of suffering. Let me repeat this. I am not saying that first you become a Christian and then God will send you a helicopter and give you a billion dollars. If that is your expectation of Christianity, you need to go to a church we all know well in Houston to listen to a more polished preacher. What I am saying is that for those who believe in God’s provision in Christ, God will give them the endurance, coping mechanisms, and resources to deal with their suffering without losing their faith and hope.

Trust in God’s provision today. His blessings are abundant for those who believe in his grace and mercy. May our Lord continue to bless you. Amen!