

6th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
February 17, 2019

Text: Luke 6:17-26

Theme: Blessed Are You

When all is well with our souls we are quick to tell others that we are incredibly blessed. I tell people all the time that I am blessed to have been called to serve this wonderful church. I am blessed that I have family members who live close by so that I can spend quality time with them. I am blessed to be in good health and I am blessed with good friends. I am blessed with an overabundance of riches. But when stated in this way I could easily take out the word *blessed* and replace it with the word *lucky*.

As I said, we use the word *blessed* when all is right in our world. So then what word do we use to describe what is happening when things do not go as we had planned? In the middle of a crisis it is very difficult to discover the blessings. We can be devastated by a sudden loss or our future might all of a sudden be uncertain. Over time our perspective might change but (in the meanwhile) do we tell people that we are just having a string of bad luck or do we say we are no longer blessed? Or do we use the term that we find in the gospel for today and say – *Woe is me*.

It is an unspoken rule that Christians refrain from using the word *luck* when describing all the good things that are happening in our lives. It is assumed that we will use the more spiritual word *blessed* because it suggests that God has intervened in our lives in a good way. So when we make it in time to the hospital to have that emergency open heart surgery we say that we are blessed and we offer our prayers of thanksgiving to God. On December 31 when our financial giving exceeds our spending then our church leaders offer words of gratitude to God for the generosity of our faithful people.

In our lesson from Luke we have the opportunity to struggle with the phrase (*blessed are you*) as it stands in contrast to the phrase (*but woe to you*). I believe this teaching of Jesus puts us in a little bit of a dilemma. Of course we want to receive the blessings of God but in

that first section Jesus tells us the ones who are blest include the poor and the hungry and those in some kind of despair.

Fair enough! As soon as Jesus started his ministry he was clear that he came to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (a jubilee year) (a year of forgiveness). Does that exclude us from also being blessed? We have no reason to think otherwise until we read the second part of his sermon. Here he uses the word *woe* to describe those not blessed and it seems like Jesus is naming us. Woe to the rich and those who are full and all who find themselves right with the world.

How confusing! We believe we are blessed by God because we are rich and full. But are we only blessed when we surrender our wealth and live in poverty? Do we have to starve ourselves of food to be seen by God? So in order to make us fit into the category we want to belong, our tendency is to water down the message. We preach this text and tell you that Jesus really meant what we read in Matthew 5. It is the poor in spirit who are blessed and people who mourn and the humble ones and the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness. And within that context we breathe easier and relax and are relieved because in a spiritual sense that describes us perfectly.

But in Luke the author wants us to know that God is turning the world upside down literally. Jesus is taking discipleship far beyond a simple *follow me* and in the end we hope and pray there is still room for us.

Our spiritual needs are not always visible but we cannot avoid seeing the millions of people who suffer from war, famine, poverty, and sickness. Every week we pray for the people on our prayer list because they have real, physical needs. It is these people that Jesus is talking about in our lesson for today.

We certainly believe we are blessed because we have all that we need to lead a comfortable life yet Jesus wants to let us know that he blesses the family of refugees who beg for enough food to get them through the day. Jesus wants us to know that he blesses the ones who cannot get out of bed because of their grief.

In Greek there are a couple of different words used in the Bible that mean *blessed*. In the lesson from Luke the word is *makários*. It describes someone who is in the enviable position of receiving provisions from God as an extension of his grace. In a sense they are undeserved blessings which God pours out on all people because of his unconditional love for us. And in response it should lead us to a sense of joy that has nothing to do with our good fortune or comfort but rather indicates that we are made holy by the hand of God. It means that God is enough.

With this understanding of what it means to be blessed now we can hear the words of Jesus as a promise. For those who are poor, God will give us the kingdom. For those who are hungry, God will fill us up. For those who weep, God will dry our tears. For those who are hated and excluded, God will walk with us to the front of the line. God has our back. God will accompany us wherever we need to go. God will help us rise above our circumstances. God will give us value and worth – not because of something we did but because of who we are in the eyes of God.

And those who stand outside the realm of the blessed are those who believe they have earned their right to all of the things they enjoy so much. We are not to use our wealth to exploit others. We are not to fill ourselves to the detriment of others. We are not to laugh at the misfortunes of others or judge them more heavily than we would judge ourselves. And for those who speak well of us let them do so because of what we have done in the name of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is open to all people who have room for nothing but God. Let God be enough.

What would it be like to be a church where we openly acknowledged that God always comes where we least expect God to be in order to bless that which the world refuses to bless, to love what the world calls unlovable, and to forgive that which the world does not believe merits our forgiveness?

In 2016 (on the Feast of All Saints) Pope Francis preached on the Beatitudes at a mass in Sweden. He called them our *identity card* that was meant to distinguish us as followers of Christ. And in his sermon he added six more beatitudes to recognize and respond to our current situation.

Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring the evils of this world. Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalized and show them mercy. Blessed are those who see God in every person and strive to make others see them as well.

Blessed are those who protect and care for all that God has created. Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others. And blessed are those who pray and work for the unity of the body of Christ.

Jesus is helping us recognize that blessings come whenever we honor each other as children of God, as we bear each other's burdens, bind each other's wounds, and meet each other's needs. We are all fragile and vulnerable and it turns out that God does not reject any of us but instead gathers us into his one holy embrace. Blessed are you, O Lord, our God. Amen