

“Blessings and Curses”

17 February 2019: 6th Sunday after the Epiphany

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 6:17-26

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“Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime”

(Aristotle, 384—322 BCE).

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I read our lesson many times—a text that bluntly irritates me. I am a sixty-odd old, white, educated, upper middle-class male. I am a United Methodist who votes in most elections. Like you, I too am interested in family, community, and church. If this lesson annoys me, then perhaps you might too be annoyed. Hear the day’s lesson:

[17] He came down with them 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. [18] They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. [19] And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

[20] Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

**[21] “Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.**

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

[22] “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. [23] 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.

**[24] “But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.**

**[25] “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.**

[26] “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets (Luke 6:17-26).

The first part of this text gratifies most of us; at least those who care about the afflicted and demon possessed. Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. For Luke, mountains are always places of prayer. While there, Jesus chooses twelve apostles then returns to a “level place.” There he finds followers from Israel

and beyond (Tyre and Sidon). Jesus heals their diseases and removes unclean spirits from those who are demon possessed. These evil “spirits” made people ritually “unclean.” This impurity did not permit them to share in corporate worship. But the rub comes at this point in Luke’s story. Luke relates Jesus’ four beatitudes and corresponding woes for the age to come. The text says some are “blessed” (happy) by being included in the Kingdom Jesus brings; others receive “woes.” Jesus’ warnings (woes) both prophecies and cautions. It is Jesus singin’ them the blues. Luke uses these contrasts:

1. the “poor” (v. 20) and the “rich” (v. 24); [poor—rich]
2. the “hungry” (v. 21a) and the “full” (v. 25a); [hungry—full]
3. the sorrowful (v. 21b) and the joyous (v. 25b); [weeping—laughing] and
4. the persecuted (v. 22) and the popular (v. 26), [rejected—accepted].

Thus, it seems that if you are a person in a bad way—poor, hungry, weeping, or persecuted—then Jesus’ message is good news. But if you are prosperous, or eat well, or are laughing, or popular, then Jesus’ message looks like bad news. If Jesus came to save all people, then this seems neither right nor fair. What is going on here?

Perhaps, the secret is in the audience’s composition. Who was Jesus speaking to then, and to whom does he speak now? Once one of my finest parishioners ask me a question about the lottery, that he assuredly asked in jest. Yet, the question was a good one. He asked, “Preacher, some of my friends and I were sitting around the other day drinking coffee and we wondered, since I was only two numbers off the \$48 million lottery: Would the church accept my tithe on winning the lottery?” This was a tantalizing question for the parishioner—and a torturous one for me.

I pondered all the good that \$4.8 million could do. Many charities could easily benefit greatly from such a gift. From the world’s perspective, a church turning down a gift like this would be out of touch with reality. I also remembered the best definition of the lottery that I have ever heard: “The lottery is a tax for people that are bad at math.” The attitude behind such a question reminds me of Jesus’ story in which he praised the widow for her small gift in contrast to others who gave large amounts: “Jesus . . . saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on’ ” (Luke 21:1-4).

The Christian life is not just about the result of what we do, but it is also about the way we do what we do. The Christian life is about the ends, but it is just as much about the means to the end. God could have zapped us all into salvation, but God used the means of Jesus’ self-sacrifice for God’s purposes. For this reason, the Christian life often makes little sense to our managed, linear, logical, rational way of doing business with the world. The gospel way is not always the way of efficiency. Efficiency, by the way and for the record, is our culture’s slogan.

Perhaps, the secret to unlocking this text is in the audience. Who was Jesus speaking to then and to whom does he now speak? I was initially irritated by this text because I forgot the audience Jesus was addressing. The text tells us plainly that Jesus addressed “a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.” These were not all wealthy nor all healthy people. They were needy people who wanted to hear a word of hope in the midst of their despair.

The “poor” are those who acknowledge their dependence on God; the “rich” in this text do not want to commit themselves to Jesus and the Kingdom; they are cozy with their present life. The Greek word translated “consolation” (v. 24) is a financial term: the “rich” do not realize what they owe to Jesus. The “hungry” hunger for the word of God, the good news; the “full” are satisfied. My friend at Duke University, Will Willimon put the dilemma of this text into perspective when he wrote:

Protestant theology and preaching have an easier time with the person in the gutter than with the person at the top. We follow Martin Luther who followed Saint Augustine in thinking that the chief sins are human pride and self-assertiveness. An admission of utter helplessness and total wretchedness is usually considered to be the first necessary step on the road to salvation. Our gospel seems tailored to fit only the downcast, the outcast, the brokenhearted, and the miserable. We think we do an adequate job of comforting the sad and uplifting the depressed. But what do we say to the strong, the mature, the joyous persons in our midst?

This is what we say: God’s grace is for everyone, rich or poor. The only difference between the two is that the poor people, by virtue of their stations in life, know that they are needy. We as a culture remind the poor of their poverty every day in every way. All people, however, stand in need of God. Karl Barth once wrote that, “too much Christian preaching speaks about an obligation which must be met in order to receive a gift, whereas the real message of the New Testament is about a gift which then leads us to an obligation.” Thus, whether the person who hears the gospel is rich or poor, we all stand in need of a right relationship with God. And to some extent, we are all together in our need. We all need the gift of God’s grace. Some of us have physical needs, some have emotional needs, and we all have spiritual needs. Perhaps Luke was merely reminding his readers that the poor grasp their need more completely than do the rich, because the poor have no other alternative.

Luke is not critical of the rich nor well fed nor laughing nor popular except that if that particular circumstance in life keeps them from a righteous relationship with God. If so, then it is to that person’s detriment. God loves all, but it may be easier for the poor to realize it, because they have far fewer distractions to the abundant life offered in Christ.

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