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Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26

A Level Place

It was my first day receiving new clients at the Elam Davies Social Service Center in Chicago. Part of Fourth Presbyterian Church, the Center provided a range of assistance for those who had need. There was an “intake interview” for someone new to the Center. Staff collected data that helped describe our ministry on grant applications and to partner organizations like the Chicago Food Bank.

I don’t know what my expectations were, but “Sarah” wasn’t among them. She was the first client of the day, dressed in designer denim and clutching the keys to a luxury brand automobile. As we went through the interview, Sarah explained. These were vestiges of her past—before illness and extended unemployment left her clinging to the ruins of a better life.

It was September in Chicago and she’d had to choose between rent on her tiny apartment or groceries. There was good news, she had started a new job that week, but her first paycheck was 10 days away and she had nothing to eat. Could we help?

Who knew that two bags of groceries could provide a momentary glimpse of the kingdom of God?

What is there in our experience, or in our cultural understanding that can help us imagine how these words hold truth: “Blessed are you all who are poor... blessed are you all who are hungry now... blessed are you all who weep now...”

As our story begins, religious authorities have already begun to question Jesus’ ministry. They are skeptical, but the people flock to him looking for relief from disease and unclean spirits, listening to his teaching about the reign of God in a country occupied by a foreign power.

As we come to this reading, Jesus has named twelve among his disciples to be “apostles.” Twelve is a significant number—one for each of the historic tribes of Israel. As Jesus and the twelve come down from the mountainside to this “level place” they are surrounded by the hopeful.

The crowd are Jews and Gentiles; people from farming and fishing villages, from the urban capitol in Jerusalem, and from the Syrophenician coast. Tyre and Sidon are also significant because they belonged to the lands of ancient Israel.

These are our signals. There is restoration afoot.

Aliens and strangers and Children of God’s covenant, press in on Jesus, trying to touch him. The power that fills him is loosed and it comes to heal them all. The people listen to him for the words that might heal a society caught up in the power of Rome.

As Roman vassals, these people have become a means of production. They are being exploited for goods and services they produce: oil and wine, fruits and bread, fish and meat. The entire society is being

warped to provide for Roman prosperity. To these people, Jesus talks about sweeping reversals—things that are hoped for but not seen in first-century Judea.

We hear this powerful sermon twice in scripture. In Matthew, Jesus speaks this sermon on the mountain. In Luke, Jesus speaks this sermon on the plain. Two hearings of his manifold teachings on the kingdom.

Wake Forrest Professor Thomas Frank notes the differences. In Matthew, we look up to Jesus standing between heaven and earth where he mediates a new covenant among those hungering for righteousness. In Luke, Jesus looks up at us having knelt to extend a healing touch, then issuing an invitation for us to come alongside and help.¹

Luke again is more direct—Jesus’ kingdom talk is about turning power and status on its head, elevating the lowly and humbling the powerful. The gospel points as always to God’s preferential option for the poor, and that is where this Sermon on the Plain begins.

Jesus looks up at the disciples—looks up at us—and proclaims, “Blessed are all you who are poor... all you who are hungry now... all you who weep now...” Jesus sees them and proclaims their blessedness—what Gay Byron calls their “theological standing before God.”²

The blessedness of the poor and hungry and grieving, is that Jesus SEES them, that God has regard for them, that the Son will tend them and enfold them into the reign of God because that is what God sent him to do.

Gay Byron notes several places that we can hear the language of “blessing” and “happiness” proclaimed in the Bible—but perhaps none so pointedly as in the psalter which proclaim, “Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods” (Psalm 40:4, NIV).

Among commentators, one encouraged hearers of this text to write a blessing addressed in the language of our modern age... My favorite is this: Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not get bent out of shape.

Sarah told me her story—it was familiar and heart breaking. While living a more prosperous times, she had never imagined that life could be so precarious. Her affluence seemed to cushion her from the harsher realities of urban life. She lived in a safe(r) part of the city in a nice home. She was a professional with a meaningful job and good wages. She had easy access to transportation, high-end groceries, and good health care. It was a good life and she felt self-sufficient in it.

A prolonged illness robbed her of employment and so many of the things which had made life easy. It also robbed her of the notion of self-sufficiency, and she expressed shame at her need for help. Her changing circumstances had given her new eyes to see the poor around her; because, however briefly, she had become one of them.

“Woe to all you who are rich... all you who are full now... all you who are laughing now...” Life turns and the consolation to which we cling can be fragile.

The blessings and woes of Luke, like the blessing of the psalter call us to answer: Where do we place our trust? Do we cling to our advantages or do we cling to our God?

Luke is not shy to uplift the message found in Jesus' teaching and in his compassion. God has special regard for those who struggle, for those who are despised, for those who are held in the iron grip of injustice. God sees and has compassion, and we who choose to follow the way of Jesus are called to see and exercise the same compassion—for others and for ourselves.

The last of the paired blessings and woes is this:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy... for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus speaks directly to his disciples and directly to us. Using the plural "you" he looks at us straight from the pages of the Bible and identifies us blessed or woeful.

His teaching is for the disciples—for the church—for each and all of us!

God delights in justice and Jesus is calling us with the voice of the prophet, to DO justice, to live with kindness, and to walk with Jesus in humility and compassion and grace.

These blessings and woes are not, Gay Byron writes, an "endorsement of suffering" or "general ethical prescriptions" or "impossible spiritualized mandates." They are, she says, "a direct pressing challenge for the disciples (and all followers of Jesus...) to reorient relationships and reverse social, economic, and political injustices so that they gain right standing in the eyes of God."³

This is the righteousness that Luke holds up to the church as its godly calling.

The church that pursues social and economic justice, runs the risk of ridicule. I still remember Glenn Beck advising his listeners, "I beg you look for the words social justice or economic justice on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can."

What Beck saw as code words for communism or totalitarianism, are in fact words that express trust and allegiance to the purposes of God who sees the poor ones, who feeds the hungry ones, who heals the sick ones, and who comforts the grieving ones. They are an allegiance with the purposes of God who would redeem our hunger and thirst for power and privilege to the cultivation of community and the common good.

In that, is the redemption not only of those who live in "want" but also of those who live in "have."

A Christmas Story is an annual favorite of mine. Recently, I have learned that its author, Charles Dickens, was marked by the experiences of his youth—reversals from a middle-class life that cast him into menial work at an early age.

This popular story was a morality play in which Dickens poked at Victorian attitudes toward the poor.

I have love watching the parade of actors who have given life to Dicken’s miserly “Scrooge.” George C Scott, Jim Carrey, Patrick Stewart... Perhaps you have too; ask me later and we can compare favorites.

I don’t know when I first made the connection: this miserable curmudgeon is named Ebenezer—the English transliteration of the Hebrew phrase “rock of help.” Scripture tells us that God is our *eben ha etzor*, our rock of help. We read in the Joshua how the children of Israel raised stone cairns to mark places where God had done transformative things, righteous things, redeeming things.

Scrooge has prospered and in his prosperity he has turned inward. He has forgotten any security outside his wealth and so money becomes his idolatrous god. All decisions serve that god and we meet him in his solitary discontent.

Four ghosts visit, first Marley, then ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. He watches himself become the man he is—fully revealed in his misery—and is warned of what may come.

"Spirit!" he cries, "...Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"

"Good Spirit," he prays as he falls to his knees, "...Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!"

My favorite moment comes as the ringing bells draw Scrooge from his bed, throwing open the window he calls out, “You there, boy, what day is it?” His vision is transformed, for now he sees this boy—once a nuisance—as wonderful and remarkable.

When the news comes that it is Christmas Day, Scrooge sets about immediately to rebuild relationships with family, to treat his employees with justice, to tend the poor and the afflicted and the lame.

The woes of his riches, which have been poor consolation, are given new purpose as Ebenezer’s heart is transformed with the grace of compassion and gratitude and trust.

In the 1980’s Martin Marty appropriated the phrase penned by Finley Dunne about the role of a good newspaper. Marty wrote, “the definition of the complete journalist or, in my application, of the fulfilled religionist [is] one comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.”⁴

Friends, in our woes let us find the compassion of God who heals us and brings us all to a level place.

Amen.

¹ Frank, Thomas Edward. “Pastoral Perspective on Luke 6:17-26.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke*. Vol 1. eds. Cynthia Jarvis, Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: WJK, 2014. 158-160.

² Byron, Gay L. “Exegetical Perspective on Luke 6:17-26.” *Feasting on the Word*. Yr C. Vol 1. eds. David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: WJK, 2009. 361.

³ Byron. 361.

⁴ Marty, Martin. *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance*. Boston: Beacon, 1987. 82.