

“Blessed Are the Poor and Hungry”

Luke 6:17-26

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Back in December, just before Christmas, we heard a reading from the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel: the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise to God. Mary extols the magnificence of God, and particularly focuses on what the coming of this child *means*. She says the Mighty One “has shown strength with his arm; / he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. / He has brought down the powerful from their thrones / and lifted up the lowly; / he has filled the hungry with good things / and sent the rich away empty. / He has come to the aid of his child Israel, / in remembrance of his mercy...” Mary is identifying *real-world* consequences for the proud, the powerful, and the rich – consequences that *those groups of people will not like* – and she is also identifying consequences for the lowly, the hungry, and those needing aid – consequences that those groups of people desperately *need*.

Then, when Jesus spoke at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth in Luke 4, he proclaimed that the Spirit of the Lord “has anointed me / to bring good news to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to set free those who are oppressed, / to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus, like Mary, identifies some *real-world consequences* of his coming into the world, very similar to what Mary had said: good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. Both passages emphasize Jesus’s care for what he calls “the least of these”: the poor, the lowly, the captives, the hungry, the blind, those who need aid, and the oppressed. These two passages make it pretty clear where Jesus’s priorities lie.

Today we come to a third passage that drives this message even further home. Jesus is standing on a “level place.” Around him are “a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.” Jews and Gentiles, natives and foreigners. Jesus’s ministry reached *all sorts* of different people, not just *one* group at the expense or exclusion of *another*. All these people had gathered to listen to his teaching, to receive healing for their many diseases, and, in some cases, to be freed from “unclean spirits” – the destructive spiritual forces that were troubling them. Everyone is trying to reach Jesus, to *touch* Jesus, because they *know*, they *sense*, they can *feel*, that *power* is coming out of him. Not *worldly* power, not *aggressive* power, not *domineering* power, not *military* power, not *violent* power – but the power of *God*, the power to cleanse, heal, restore, and renew.

Then, Jesus has a few words to say. He begins, like he does in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel, with some blessings. These blessings are *similar* to the blessings in Matthew – the Beatitudes – but they are also *very different*. There are four of them: “Blessed are you who are poor, / for yours is the kingdom of God. / Blessed are you who are hungry now, / for you will be filled. / Blessed are you who weep now, / for you will laugh. / Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude

you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.” Do those sound like the Beatitudes you learned in Sunday School? Perhaps not. Many of us grew up learning blessings like these: “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*, for they will be filled....” There is a big difference between being *poor in spirit* and being actually *poor*. There is also a big difference between *hungry and thirsty for righteousness* and being actually *hungry*. These blessings that Jesus offers in Luke’s Gospel are *similar* to those he offers in Matthew’s Gospel ... but they are also *very, very different*. Broadly speaking, the blessings Jesus offers in Matthew are more *spiritual* in nature, while the blessings he offers in Luke are more *practical* in nature. They have to do with *real-world economic circumstances* that are faced by *real-world people*.

There are, as I said, four *blessings* that Jesus offers here in Luke. Jesus follows these with a series of four *woes*: “woe to you who are rich, / for you have received your consolation. / 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. / Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.” Each one of those four *woes* is the *direct opposite* of one of the preceding four *blessings*. It goes like this:

- (1) Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
- (2) Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. But woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
- (3) Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. But woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.
- (4) Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. But woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Jesus draws a contrast between the *poor* and the *rich*, between the *hungry* and the *full*, between those who are *weeping* and those who are *laughing*, between those who are *hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed* as a result of their faith and integrity, and those who are *spoken well of* as a result of their hypocrisy and lies. Remember, he’s speaking to a crowd. Are some of them poor? Yes. Are some rich? Yes. Are some hungry? Yes. Are some full? Yes. Are some weeping? Yes. Are some laughing? Yes. Are some hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed? Yes. Are some spoken well of by the “powers that be”? Yes. Are some full of faith and integrity? Yes. Are some full of hypocrisy and falsehoods? Yes. Are some feeling *special* and *hopeful* because of what Jesus is saying? Undoubtedly, yes. Are some feeling *offended* and *angry* because of what Jesus is saying? Undoubtedly ... yes. Jesus doesn’t bless *everybody*. Not everybody feels good about this sermon. Some people will walk away feeling *warned*, feeling *challenged*, feeling *called out*, maybe even feeling *judged*. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus’s sermon will cause *some* of those people to seriously reflect on their life and the economic choices they are making.

This passage, like the other two before it, makes it abundantly clear: Jesus cares about the people who are *really, truly poor*. Jesus cares about the people who are *really, truly hungry*. Jesus cares about the people who are *really, truly rejected*. Jesus cares about the people who are feeling *really, truly hopeless*. There were then – and there remain today – a *lot* of people who fall in those categories.

This passage also, like the other two before it, makes it abundantly clear: Jesus is fundamentally opposed to people who are *proud, powerful, rich, full, laughing, spoken well of* – while other people are

suffering. Jesus is saying: *this is not how God wants things to be. Some people should not be rich and full, while other people are poor and hungry.* God cares about *justice* – and that situation isn't *just*.

Let's face some facts. The world's wealthiest billionaires have gotten *exponentially* wealthier over the past five years. The gap between the ultra-rich and the very poor has been growing at an *incredible* rate. The wealth of the average white family in this country is *about five times* as much as the wealth of the average Latino family, and about *seven times* greater than the wealth of the average Black family. The United States comprises about 5% of the world's population and owns about 30% of the world's wealth. About one out of every nine people in the United States lives in poverty. Nearly 45% of people around the world are poor, and about one out of every twelve people around the world live in extreme poverty. One percent of the world's richest people own more wealth than the bottom 95% combined. I could go on and on – there is an enormous amount of data out there! – but you get the idea. *There is a tremendous amount of wealth inequality both in our country and around the world.* Here in the United States, that wealth inequality is also, to a very large extent, a *racial* inequality.

Jesus says: “Blessed are you who are poor. Woe to you who are rich. Blessed are you who are hungry now. Woe to you who are full now.” This means: Jesus not only cares about the poor and the hungry – *he also is calling on the rich and the full to do something about it* – if not for sake of the poor and hungry, then for the sake of *their own souls*. The word “woe” means that *God is not okay with their choices*. The word “woe” means that *God is telling the rich and full that they need to change their ways*. The word “woe” means that *there is a judgment coming*, from which the rich and full will not escape.

Jesus's profound care and concern for the well-being of “the least of these” is called the “preferential option for the poor.” It is perhaps best summed up in these words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew: “I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40) The implication is that the church of Jesus Christ has an *ethical and moral obligation* to care for the poor and needy. Perhaps Pope Benedict XVI said it best: “love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her [the church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.” If the church of Jesus Christ isn't doing this – if it doesn't *emphasize* this – then it hardly deserves to be called the church of *Jesus Christ*.

We do a lot of good things here at Mason First Presbyterian Church to support the poor and hungry. We deliver 84 lunches to feed homeless people at Advent House every week. We donate large quantities of food to the Food Bank. We collect coats, boots, and scarves and give them away. We adopt families at Christmas and bring them gifts. We sell usable clothes and other goods at low prices at the rummage sale. We collect money every month to help feed the hungry. We give away money to worthy organizations like Mason Community Services. We do a *lot*. The Mission Committee and the Deacons deserve our profound support and gratitude for their ongoing efforts to help “the least of these.”

Yet I wonder if we are doing *enough*. The needs are only getting greater. The disparities are only getting wider. Aid is being cut. Our church has an annual budget of about \$367,000. The Mission Committee only gets about 6% of that. I think it's time we work to bring that up to *ten*. A full *tithe*. “To bring good news to the poor.” That is *our job*. I believe we could do *more*. I believe we *should* do more.

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