

Sunday, February 13, 2022
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

Jeremiah 17.5-10; Psalm 1; Luke 6.17-26

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/352099036762500>

(Sermon begins at about 16:45)

“Blessed Are . . .”

We’re all familiar with the Beatitudes. The series of pithy sayings, each beginning with “Blessed are,” recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew as part of the Sermon on the Mount. Today, we hear Luke’s version of this sermon, which is slightly different. While Matthew has this sermon taking place on a mountain, Luke notes that this sermon happened “on a level place.” Hence, this is often referred to as the Sermon on the Plain. There are other notable differences, as well. Namely in the structure of the sayings delivered by Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records nine sayings, all beginning with “Blessed are.” Luke, however, records eight sayings. But only four begin “Blessed are.” The other four begin “Woe to you.” With the “woe” statements being the opposites of the “blessed are” statements. Some scholars believe these may be the same sermon, just that the details were remembered differently. After all, both Matthew and Luke were written about 60 years after the fact and were not even written by eyewitnesses to the events; both relying on secondhand accounts and possibly other source documents now lost to us. Others think they may be different sermons with common themes. The themes presented were certainly part of Jesus’ core teachings, so he undoubtedly repeated himself a lot over the three years of his public ministry.

Maybe it’s my engineering brain, but I prefer the way Luke structures the sermon. The four “woe” statements counterbalancing the four “blessed are” statements. Which is not something new to Jesus. This style of preaching—counterbalancing blessings and woes—is as old as scripture itself. We see Jeremiah using this same literary device in today’s Old Testament reading. First proclaiming: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD” (Jer 17.5); and then following up with “Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD” (Jer 17.7). And similarly in our Psalm: “Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,” followed up with “It is not so with the wicked” (Ps 1.1,4). And there are certainly other examples throughout the Old Testament. A common device to emphasize the speaker’s thesis.

Having a parallel structure of blessings and woes focusing on the same topics may seem redundant. “Blessed are you who are poor . . . But woe to you who are rich.” “Blessed are you who are hungry now . . . [but] woe to you who are full now.” “Blessed are you who weep now . . . [but] Woe to you who are laughing now.” “Blessed are you when people hate you . . . exclude you . . . revile you . . . and defame you . . . [but] Woe to you when all speak well of you.” While repetitive, Jesus would have had his reasons for using this approach.

The most obvious seems to be to emphasize the areas that were important to Jesus in his public ministry. We know that Jesus had a particular concern for the poor and the marginalized:

“Blessed are you who are poor” and “Blessed are you who hunger.” For those who had suffered loss in their lives: “Blessed are you who weep.” For those who were ostracized: “Blessed are you when people hate you.” These are all addressed to people who have experienced particular categories of misfortune, even oppression. But these four “blessed are” statements and the corresponding “woe” statements are not limited to these specific categories. These are merely illustrative, and can also be representative of broader aspects of the human experience.

“Blessed are you who are poor” and “woe to you who are rich” addressing not just level of wealth but representing the broader area of the material things that provide for our comfort and well-being. The need for a place to shelter and be safe from the elements and other potential threats. The need for clothes to keep us warm. The need for other material resources that help sustain, even improve, our quality of life.

“Blessed are you who are hungry” and “woe to you who are full” addressing not just the need for food or lack thereof but representing all aspects of our physical health and well-being.

“Blessed are you who weep” and “woe to you who are laughing” addressing not just particular emotions of sorrow and grief, of joy and laughter, but representing the full range of our emotional and mental well-being.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, etc.” and “woe to you when all speak well of you” addressing not just acceptance or marginalization, but representing all aspects of relationship with others. Both interpersonal and societal.

These four categories outlined in Jesus’ sermon—the material, the physical, the mental and emotional, and the relational—sum up the totality of the human being. Of the human experience. Representing the goal and desire for human wellness and wholeness in its various forms. With the exception of the spiritual. But for Jesus, that really is a given and what undergirds all other categories.

Framing and viewing the “blessed are” and “woe” statements in these broader categories encompassing the totality of human experience serves to expand Jesus’ audience. He is not just addressing the poor, the hungry, the grieving or sorrowful, and the ostracized. He is not just addressing the rich, those who are filled, the joyful, and those who are well-liked or respected. He is addressing everyone. Because the reality is, no one of us falls solely into the “blessed are” category or the “woe to you” category. One can be rich but grieving. One can be poor but well-liked. You get the picture. And where we are changes over time. We move between the various categories depending on what is going on in our lives. Recognizing this, Jesus would have sought to make statements that everyone could relate to. That would draw everyone into his core message.

Of course, having both “blessed are” and “woe” statements does set up a bit of a tension. Which was probably the point. Most likely as a means of issuing a challenge. This tension, this challenge, is particularly evident to us 21st century residents of the wealthiest nation in the world. Think back a few minutes to when I first read the Gospel for today. How did you feel, what was your gut reaction, when I read those words? Particularly when I got to the “woe”

statements. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation”? Because even if not wealthy by American standards, we are still among the wealthiest people on the planet. Does that mean we are all doomed by virtue of our relative riches? And what about the other “woes”? Are we doomed because we have enough to eat, or are happy, or because people like us? That there is no hope for us? No, of course not. For Jesus, this is about where our focus is. About where we place our priorities.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus talks about such things as power and wealth as being obstacles, even distractions, which can get in the way of living the Gospel. Obstacles to and distractions from caring for the needs of others. Obstacles to and distractions from loving our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus’ juxtaposing the “blessed are” and “woe” statements issues a challenge to those who are better off, who are in a better position to love their neighbors as themselves. To reorder their priorities to be in alignment with Jesus’ and God’s priorities. Because the way that the poor and the hungry will be blessed is through our generosity. The way those who weep will be blessed is through our providing comfort and solace. The way those who are hated will be blessed is through our friendship and love.

And then there will be those times when we are the ones in need of being blessed by others. By those who provide for us out of their generosity. Those who provide us with comfort and solace. Those who reach out to us in friendship and love. Jesus’ balancing of “blessed are” and “woe” statements recognizes this reality. And given the tension between the “blessed are” and the “woe” statements, there is recognition that both categories carry potential barriers to living into the fullness of who we are created to be. As Lutheran Pastor Amy Zietlow summarizes today’s Gospel:

In both places, Jesus aims to remove any barriers to seeing God’s image reflected in our lives. Poverty, hunger, tears, and being hated can distort our reflection and convince us that we are less than human. Jesus brings blessing, comfort, and hope in order to restore a sense of holy createdness. Wealth, full bellies, mirth, and the esteem of others can also distort our sense of self. Jesus calls out, “Whoa!” and in that holy pause we can repent and make room for God’s presence in our lives.¹

Today’s Gospel is not intended to pit people with differing experiences of life against each other. And it certainly is not intended to make us feel bad about ourselves. Jesus’ words are intended to be a lens through which we can view our lives and our ever-changing circumstances. His words are intended to bring us blessing and encouragement, wherever we are in our lives. They are intended to be a tool, a guide, to help us assess where we are in our lives and how that impacts our lives of faith. How where we are impacts our relationship with God and with one another. So that we recognize that no matter what, we are blessed by virtue of being beloved children of God. And so that if—when—we find ourselves out of balance in that relationship, we can take corrective actions and reorient ourselves to live more fully into a Christ-centered life. In so doing, we become a blessing to others, and we are indeed blessed.

¹ Amy Zietlow, “Living By the Word: February 13, Epiphany 6C,” *The Christian Century*, January 17, 2022. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/february-13-epiphany-6c-luke-617-26>.