

Sunday, February 16, 2025
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

Luke 6.17-26

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1360913678248451>

(Sermon begins at about 21:00)

“A Level Place”

Today we hear the beginning of what is often referred to as the “Sermon on the Plain.” Not to be confused with the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. Although there certainly are some similarities. And some differences. While an event is often recorded in more than one Gospel, the accounts of the same event, the details, can vary across Gospels. But in this case, the differences are significant enough that the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon the Plain are likely completely different events, but with some parallel themes. After all, it is not unreasonable to assume that, given the amount of preaching and teaching Jesus did, he may well have had a basic outline that he followed. The differences between these two famous sermons indicating that Jesus likely modified his message based on his audience or their context.

The Sermon on the Mount as reported in Matthew’s Gospel is much longer than the Sermon on the Plain. The Sermon on the Mount addresses broader spiritual principles, instructing Jesus’ followers in a way that will help shape their identity and lifestyle as disciples. Today’s Sermon on the Plain is more concise, focusing more specifically on the narrower topic of social justice. Perhaps saying something about Jesus’ audience. Although given the structure of his sermon, it is hard to determine specifically what that might be. Unlike the Sermon on the Mount, which lays out nine “blessed are” statements, here in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus lays out a carefully balanced message of only four “blessed are you” statements, followed by four parallel and thematically linked “woe to you” statements.

Rearranging the statements thematically, we end up with:

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, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you, but woe to you when all speak well of you.

This provides a little more sobering message. At least in the Sermon on the Mount, with its “blessed are” and no “woe to you,” one could rationalize that, no matter who they were or their life’s situation, they fall into at least some of the categories of being blessed. But here, in the Sermon on the Plain, there is a clear delineation. Depending on who you are, depending on your particular situation, you are clearly one or the other: blessed or not. And the use of “woe to you” and the resulting actions certainly give an indication of impending judgment and the

resulting consequences. It's enough to make some of us, if not, to some degree, all of us, squirm a little.

Just speaking for myself, when it comes to poor vs. rich, I do not consider myself particularly poor or rich. But relatively speaking, compared to so many, I would have to concede that I fall in the "woe to you" category. When looking at hungry or being full, Jesus is obviously not talking about a bit of a hunger pang because I have not eaten in a few hours, but whether I have regular access to food. That being the case, I clearly fall in the "woe to you" category. When it comes to weeping vs. laughing, I certainly have those things that worry me and cause me to weep. But all-in-all, I am more joyful than sorrowful, so I guess I again fall in the "woe to you" category. When it comes to people hating me or speaking well of me, I know that there are some who may not particularly like me. But overall, I feel pretty certain that most people I deal with at least tolerate me. So, yeah, another mark in the "woe to you" column.

And I would venture to say that the vast majority of us, if doing the same mental calculations, would end up with at least a few "woe to yous." If not an outright four "woe to yous" and zero "blessed are yous." So what does that say about us? And if that is indeed the case, where is the good news of the Gospel if so many of us end up on the wrong side of the "blessed are" / "woe to you" evaluation?

Now, we could certainly argue that things were different in Jesus' time. In a time and place where the people lived under the oppression of the Roman Empire, the vast majority of the people that Jesus encountered—certainly the vast majority of those who were inclined to seek him out—would have been more likely to be poor, hungry, generally worried and sorrowful, and looked down upon. The vast majority of those Jesus ministered to were, by sheer circumstances of the time, in need of hearing a message of blessing. A message promising that the poor, who were on the margins and even those considered outcasts, will be included in God's kingdom. A message that the hungry will be filled and have enough to eat in God's kingdom. A message that those who had no real cause for joy in their day-to-day lives because of oppressive conditions, will have cause for rejoicing in God's kingdom. A message that those who were looked down upon will be welcomed and valued in God's kingdom. A promise of great reversal. That they will be rewarded for all the negative things they endured in this life. Certainly a message of hope for the vast majority of Jesus' audience.

But what about the portion that were rich, who had plenty to eat, who were generally more joyful because of the opportunities afforded by their privilege and status, who were highly regarded because of their social standing? Listening to the message Jesus preached, they were basically out of luck: "You all have your riches and status and all that goes with it, lives of relative ease and comfort. Enjoy it while it lasts, because in God's kingdom things will be turned upside down." Again, a message of great reversal. All the good things they have now will be unceremoniously stripped away, leaving nothing. Well, leaving nothing good. Leaving only the bad and the ugly.

Is that really how God works? Should we be worried?

If God is who we say he is, if God is who we believe he is, if God is a god of love, of compassion, of mercy, then, the answer is “no.” We can all breathe a collective sigh of relief.

However, there is a “but.” After all, there is a reason Jesus laid out his Sermon on the Plain the way he did: providing parallels between the “blessed are” and the “woe to you.” Grouping all the “blessed are” statements together, he first sends a message of hope to those who are poor or hungry or sorrowful or oppressed and not well regarded. He provides a promise that this is only temporary, and that in God’s kingdom, all that will be reversed. Now that that segment of his audience is assured of what to expect, he can turn his attention to those who are rich, well-fed, joyful, and well-regarded. After hearing the good news delivered to the first group, they are probably, with some arrogance, thinking, “well, if those people are going to be taken care of and their lives improved, how much more will we be blessed.” Wrong! Woe to you. Woe to you. Woe to you. Woe to you.

And yet, going back to our understanding of who God is, of how God operates, and looking at the “woe to you” statements through that lens, we begin to get a different picture of Jesus’ true message to those who have done well in this life. His statements are not a condemnation of wealth, of the good things in life, of living joyfully, of being held in esteem by others. After all, God does not want us to live miserable lives. God wants the best for his beloved children. For all his beloved children.

The whole message is structured as if to indicate a desire that rather than some be exalted and some be condemned, rather than there being a great reversal of both groups, there is actually to be a great equalization. A leveling of the playing field, as it were. After all, it’s right there in the first verse of today’s Gospel passage: “Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place.” The place where he chose to preach from providing a visual image of the message he was proclaiming. The need for a leveling of the social order so that all are cared for, that all will have the opportunity to thrive.

In addressing the more affluent and powerful in the crowd with “woe to you” statements, he was seeking to shake them out of their complacency. To get them to realize that this dichotomy between the poor and the rich, the hungry and the well-fed, the sorrowful and the joyful, the oppressed and the well-regarded, is completely inconsistent with the Gospel message. That there is a need for a great reversal, for a great equalization, for a great leveling. And if that is going to happen, it is incumbent upon those with means to make the necessary changes. Changes to their own lives and to the social systems and structures that encourage and perpetuate such dichotomies. In his “woe to you” statements, Jesus extending an invitation by challenging the rich and powerful to take action, to make a difference, and to help realize the goals of God’s kingdom here and now, not in some distant future.

This is the message, the challenge, the invitation, that Jesus issues to us, as well. As one commentator so eloquently summarizes:

Our lives are complicated, and most of us will fit into both of these categories—blessing and woe—in different respects. To the extent that we find ourselves in need, or in despair, or left out, Jesus brings us words of blessing and encouragement. To the extent that we find

ourselves in prosperity, or satisfaction, or privilege, Jesus brings us words of challenge, exhorting us to share God's blessings with our neighbors, and with all of creation. These aren't two separate ideas; they're two sides of the same Gospel, the Gospel of Jubilee.¹

In responding to the challenge Jesus issues in his Sermon on the Plain, we have the opportunity to participate in the building of God's kingdom. One characterized by a great leveling, in which images of woe are turned into means of blessing. In which we all are able to stand on a level place, where messages of "woe to you" are turned into promises of "blessed are you" for all God's beloveds.

¹ "Blessing and Woe: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany Week 6," SALT, February 11, 2025.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/2/12/blessing-and-woe-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-6>.