

With a clear head and a heart filled with cautious hope, Christ is calling us to see the world and our place in it.

Our scripture today is taken from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6, verses 17-26. Some of you may find this familiar – but its not often one that we spend time with. For one – the text in Matthew is very poetic and rolls off the tongue well. But the Luke text is mostly not as well-known because we don't know what to do with all of it.

Luke 6:17-26

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.

Both Matthew and Luke share a similar source. And, just like history, the perspective is always biased toward the historian's culture, background and audience. This is important to note here. The difference between the two texts is much broader than it first appears – and yet the difference doesn't devalue the either of the two perspectives.

Matthew's Gospel is a Gospel for the Jews – and thus it is presented with references and accounts, perspectives and prophetic quotations that a faithful Jew of that time would understand. Jesus, in Matthew brings in the new law and new interpretation of the law to the people of God. Like Moses on Mt. Sinai, Jesus teaches the people on the mountain.

Luke's Gospel is written for Gentiles – those who don't necessarily know the history or the background – the prophesies or the ancient songs. Luke writes for the Early Church who was struggling with persecution – because the way of Christ is vastly different than their neighbours. The Gospel of Luke is written in such a way as to make Jesus accessible to them amid their struggle.

Again, the differences between the gospels does NOT invalidate either one, but enriches the story and person of Jesus so we can understand Christ in a more well-rounded way.

In the Gospel of Luke, after Jesus establishes his authority as a rabbi by teaching in the synagogues, and then choosing the apostles, Jesus embarks on his great teaching mission. And, unlike the Jesus in Matthew who goes up the mountain to pray and get away from the crowd, Jesus in Luke spends the night on the mountain and then comes down the mountain to the plain toward the people. Here all the people are trying to touch him because, Luke says, “power came out from him and healed them all.”

I love this picture, as I see it in my mind. Jesus is not sitting aloof on some mountain-top, dispensing his wisdom to the masses. As much as the “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew touches my soul, the location of Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” grabs me more. So, standing on the level place, smack dab in the middle of everyone, Jesus speaks the “plain truth.”

And what does he say?

It is difficult to read Luke’s Beatitudes without comparing them to Matthew’s. The two sermons share an obvious similarity and some significant differences. The main difference between the two is that Matthew emphasizes internal and personal attitudes. Matthew “spiritualizes” the beatitudes – as you can see when Jesus in Matthew says, “Blessed are the poor...In Spirit.”

Luke, on the other hand, draws in themes that he uses throughout the gospel, namely social, economic, physical, AND spiritual. The hungry, in Luke, long for righteousness, but also for food.

So, looking up at his disciples – while healing the people on the plain, Jesus says,

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

Jesus here is talking about real financial struggles. He’s not saying, “cash poor, but property rich.” He’s talking about real pennies being pinched, when you are scraping to make ends meet. He’s talking about having to make the tough decision as to which is more important – food on the table or heat in the house or plumbing that works. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way, "you’re blessed when you’ve lost it all. God’s kingdom is there for the finding."

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."

So, I know that some of you are hungry – I know two little people – and likely a few more that would LOVE to have a smackerel of a snack right now – but that’s not the hunger Jesus is talking about. Let’s not appropriate this blessing for ourselves in a way that takes it from those who face literal starvation in this world. I KNOW that there are many around the world who are now panicking because USAID had been providing food and staffing for refugee camps. I know that, aside from bombing, starvation is the number one cause of death for children in Gaza.

Having said that, however, I don’t mean to exclude the rest of us from this blessing. It’s just that most of us don’t know what it is for our bellies to really be empty. If we did, then I believe we would feel more outrage and probably contribute even more to services – like our local food bank. Or maybe we would stop and give a lunch to one who is hungry on the side of the road in Moses Lake. We might stop seeking every way possible to grab more "stuff" for ourselves and start giving more to those in need.

Blessed are the hungry – for righteousness, yes, but also for food, for love, for kindness...for the basic needs that we take for granted...for you will be filled.

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

We’ve all known tears lately. I think that we – at least partially – can understand weeping now.

One of the most holy times in our lives is the time in between – while we wait for what is next. When grief and weeping and deep mourning is sprinkled with sparkles of joy. Scripture tells us that after a dark night – joy comes in the morning and that, with the dawn, comes God’s never-failing love and renewed mercy and faithfulness. This laughter welling up in us is not a mocking or disdainful laugh but a laugh as full of joy as weeping is full of sorrow. Laughter is a promise of things to come – of future breaking into the present.

“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 surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

In Eugene Peterson’s interpretation, *The Message*, We read: “Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don’t like it, I do ... and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.”

Speak the truth of what you know of God’s love and there will be those in this world who hate you for it likely because they feel uncomfortable and a little guilty/ashamed. Jesus says we’re in good company and our reward is already with God. It is not easy to speak the truth of God’s love for everyone – even in the face of opposition. We see that even in our own communities when those who stand up to injustice are belittled, fired, bullied and harassed. Don’t let that stop you. Your true source of respect – like all necessities of life, is our God who provides.

After this friendly and uplifting portion of the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus jumps right into the WOE section. And this part, quite frankly, makes me feel a little uncomfortable. Why? Because I fit into the slots here – Jesus is saying these woes to me. – To US. We aim to be rich, full, laughing, and respected and we look down on those who can’t “Pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”

But this reaction may be precisely why Jesus adds the woes after the blessings because no matter how hopeful his words are, some in the crowd then and now have placed their trust elsewhere, and the choices they have made are working for them...but are they really?

“Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” In *The Message* it reads, “It’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you’ll ever get.”

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

It’s trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself. Your *self* will not satisfy you for long.”

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

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

"There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests —look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular."

Your task is to be true, not popular.

Friends, this truth may be plain, but that doesn't mean it's always obvious, nor is it always easy. We may want to avoid these verses – but we cannot overlook them. They are good reminders that we have much to learn – both individually and collectively.

But here I want to make something clear. These woes are NOT curses. Jesus isn't doling out blessings and curses. These woes are warnings / cautions / heads-up. If you are rich, or full, or joyful or even popular, you do not have to stop eating so that you can empathize with the hungry.

Jesus reminded the people then as he does now today that God knows and sees us and weighs our hearts and recognizes our complexities and yearns for us to let go of the stuff that we cling to that diminish other's worths to lift ourselves up.

God has a heart for those who are broken – we dare not break them more just because it is the new cool thing to do. God welcomes those who are at the bottom – let us welcome them too – even if it is unpopular. God knows our hunger – we dare not hide the bread because it isn't profitable. God is acquainted with all our grief – we dare turn our noses at those who "should be over it already."

But there is one more thing. And this, perhaps, is the BEST thing. Even when we who are full now become hungry, Jesus promises we will again become filled. Even when we who laugh now, weep with mourning – Jesus promises that someday we will laugh again with joy.

God desires for us to open our eyes to see the wonder of God moving in our midst – that in times of want and in our times of plenty we will be loved. We have a task – we who have plenty now – and that task is to open our eyes and our hearts to those who do not have plenty. Our task right now – we who have much – is to open our mouths and our hands to SAY and DO something about the injustices we see all around us. Our task right now is to listen to and hear, sit with and grieve, stand up and, like Jesus, be amongst our neighbours – on the same plain.

And Christ, the great leveler meets us here.

Menno Mennonite Church
February 16, 2025

Blessings All Around
Luke 6:17-26

Emily Toews