

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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### Luke 6:17-26 (NRSV)

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.

### SEEKING A BLESSING

Today's lesson begins just like last week's lesson ... with a crowd of people coming to Jesus. But, now the crowds have gotten even bigger.

The Bible tells us that there were people there from all Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon ... from all over.

And once again they want to hear Jesus and be touched by him. Power was coming out of him, and they wanted some of that power. To put another way, they wanted Jesus to bless them.

When we think of blessings, we define them like the crowd. Blessings come when there is power to heal our diseases. Blessings come when we get what we want from life and from God.

In the Old Testament, many of the major characters spend their whole life seeking the elusive blessing of God, trying to find that Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.

And the blessing always seems to be just out of reach.

### BLESSINGS THAT ARE HARD TO SWALLOW!

But, now the time for blessing has finally come to God's people. Power is coming out of this man Jesus. He does what only God can do, and people can't wait to hear what he has to say.

But, I suspect that when he does speak they are totally flabbergasted by the message ... as indeed we are often amazed even today.

You see, the teachings of the Bible are often hard to swallow. They are quite often the opposite of what we believe. Our lesson for today is a good example.

Instead of saying what we say, "Blessed are the rich," blessed are those who match all six numbers and win 40 million dollars in the lottery, Jesus says just the opposite. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven."

You don't hear that anywhere else! Even in the church we are reluctant to suggest that poverty can be a blessing. We promote Christianity as the road to success. We have transformed the gospel into glorified positive thinking.

But, those of us who preach from the lectionary run into a significant roadblock if we like that kind of preaching. Every three years when we are obliged to preach from the gospel of Luke.

It's called the Sermon on the Plain because that's where Jesus preached it, but I like to think of it as my sermon title puts it, "Plain Talk about the Kingdom." It plainly explains to us what we may not want to hear.

Someone in my Bible study group this past week said, "We have to face the fact that Christianity is just a hard religion to follow." And today's lesson is a case in point. What we would like to believe is often at odds with much of what Jesus actually taught.

Luke's message is the most difficult to hear when it comes to this teaching. In Luke's gospel, Jesus not only blesses what we hate; he also curses what we love.

Jesus not only says "blessed are the poor," but he also says, "Woe to you who are rich."

Jesus not only says "blessed are those who are sorrowful" but "woe to you who are laughing now."

Jesus not only says "blessed are the hungry," but "Woe to you who are well fed."

Jesus says that are those who are persecuted are "blessed" while those who are well liked are cursed.

Truly the world presented by Jesus is a world turned upside down. The kingdom of God is unlike any kingdom we can imagine.

## POVERTY IS NOT A VIRTUE

What in the world can this passage mean to us? We live in one of the richest, most successful countries in the world.

Hunger may be a problem for some people, but for most of us our biggest problem is the battle of the bulge. Books on a proper diet take up the most shelves on the self help section of the local bookstore.

How can the words of Jesus apply to us? Does this mean that we are to renounce riches and earthly comforts to make it into the kingdom of God?

There is in fact a long tradition of people in the Christian Church who did just that. They are a kind of “super disciples” who heroically took a vow of poverty in order to follow Jesus.

But, despite much good that has done by people who have taken a vow like this, I think that we misunderstand this passage if we suggest that poverty or sorrow or persecution are virtues to be sought ... that they are somehow good for us like aerobics!

That would not be Christianity. That would be masochism.

For those of us who know what it is like to live from paycheck to paycheck ... or to be out of work altogether ... the thought of a kingdom where poverty is valued is not a pleasant prospect.

Neither is a kingdom where people are hungry or persecuted or full of sorrow. All of these things we try to avoid as best we can. They are certainly not what we would consider to be the good life.

Yet, Jesus tells us in this passage, *if we are in that circumstance*, he has good news. We are not alone. Even though no one else seems to care, God cares.

The kingdom of God is about wiping away tears. The kingdom of God is about feeding the hungry. The kingdom of God is about bringing courage and encouragement to those who are persecuted for the sake of the gospel. And so God’s priorities should be our priority in the church. We should be especially attentive to those who are need.

That is why we serve meals to the homeless and collect groceries for families in need. That’s why the Presbyterian Women often prepare a meal for the family after a funeral.

That's why the church often sticks its neck out for minorities that are persecuted and marginalized in this country. We are willing to endure controversy and conflict in order to promote peace and justice.

Our efforts for God's kingdom often focus on politically unpopular social change that will benefit the least among us. A strong argument could be made from both the Old and New Testaments that this is what God's kingdom is all about.

It's not that we believe our small acts will end the suffering of the world or even make a dent in the suffering. It's a symbolic act, a way of saying in actions and words, "We dream of a new day coming, a day when the world will be turned on its head by the coming of God's kingdom. We see a new day coming when grief and hunger and poverty and prejudice will be history."

## BLESSINGS FOR HARD PRESSED DISCIPLES

But, this passage is about more than just dreaming of that kingdom that comes. It's a word of encouragement for those who are poor or sorrowful or persecuted because they have chosen to follow Jesus today.

I think the key to understanding this passage is found in verse 20. These beatitudes are directed specifically at the disciples of Jesus.

The Scripture tells us that Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who are hungry. Blessed are you who are sorrowful. Blessed are you who are persecuted."

The beatitudes are blessings for hard pressed disciples. Poverty, hunger, sorrow and persecution are apt descriptions of the life of those first disciples.

They did indeed give up everything to follow Jesus. Last week we learned that they left their boats and their fishing nets to follow Jesus. They are poor because they abandoned their jobs to follow Jesus.

Many times the Bible tells us that Jesus and his disciples were so busy tending to the needs of the ever present crowds that they didn't even have time to eat. They were often hungry.

(See for example Mark 8:20-21)

They would soon be sorrowful when their Master is crucified.

And the rest of their lives would be spent in conflict with the "powers that be" as they proclaimed the gospel. According to church tradition most of them met a martyr's death.

And yet when Jesus looked at them he pronounced them blessed. Their sacrifices, their sorrow, their hunger and their poverty had a purpose. Their sacrifices were in service to the kingdom of God. Their sacrifices were for a greater cause.

This is the blessing that Jesus offered to disciples, a life filled with hope, and the promise of an even greater day coming.

## A LIFE WORTH LIVING

I think that this is the blessing that we need as well. We don't need the "so called" blessings of material prosperity and constant entertainment.

We need a life that is worth living. We need a reason for being.

If we try to fill that spiritual need with a material blessing like food or money or happiness or success, we'll find that all those good things can become a curse instead of a blessing.

If our highest goal in life is to eat, drink and be merry, what do we do with that empty feeling that comes at the end of our life? What do we do when our soul is required of us?

Jesus said that we need more than just bread. We need the bread of life. We need to be a part of God's purpose and plan.

As I said before the unique thing about Luke's presentation is the fact that he not only mentions blessings for those who have the courage to sacrifice for the kingdom but he also mentions curses for those who do not have the courage to make that leap of faith.

If we are happy with the way things are in our life, then we will never seek God. Satisfaction breeds contempt for all things spiritual.

There has to be a hunger, a striving in our life that cannot be filled with anything but God's kingdom. If we don't hunger for the right things, we will never be fed. In a spiritual sense, hunger can be a blessing and satisfaction can be a curse.

That's why Jesus said, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." In other words if you think that you have everything there is no motivation to seek God's salvation. You have your consolation in a fancy car and a comfortable home.

Jesus also said, "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry." I have a theory that many of us eat too much, buy too much and generally do too much because we have an underlying spiritual hunger that cannot even be satisfied by Mrs. Mac's blue plate special.

And then Jesus continues the woes by saying, "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." Many of us use laughter as a way of covering up the deep sorrow that is at the very center of our lives.

I've noticed that today's comedians have a hard edge, a rage that is only partially hidden by their humor. We think that we are so smart, so sophisticated in our biting satire. But, maybe our humor hides what we are afraid to name.

## THE COURAGE TO CONFRONT

Finally Jesus talks about those who want people to like them above all else. Jesus said, "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

We see this problem quite often in the church. Decisions are made not on the basis of what God in Christ wants us to do but how we can best avoid upsetting anyone.

Do we seriously think that the gospel can be proclaimed without causing conflict? The kingdom of God by its very nature confronts those things in our lives and in society that we would rather not consider. Following Jesus will always bring about persecution of one kind or another because God in Christ is always “upsetting our apple cart.”

I love the way the new modern paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message* translates this verse,

"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." Luke 6:26 (MsgB)

That's been one of the hardest lessons for me to learn. I like to please people, and yet quite often that is just not possible. Instead of being a people pleaser we are called to be truth tellers. And that can involve conflict and personal struggle.

William Sloan Coffin put it this way,  
“In contrast to many a preacher today, Jesus knew that ‘Love your enemies’ didn’t mean ‘don’t make any.’ In almost every church there are gentle cowards who think their gentleness offsets their cowardice. It doesn’t. Compassion frequently demands confrontation ... “

Some of the great spiritual discoveries of my life did not come in the rarified air of the pastor’s study. They came as a result of conflict and pain. They came in the middle of the night with a sorrow that would not loosen its grip and a hunger that would not go away.

In the struggle the glory of God is seen most clearly.

The central symbol of our faith is a cross, a sign of conflict and persecution. And Jesus always told his disciples that a cross would be at the center of their

life as well. The disciples of Jesus wouldn't have it any easier. If he was persecuted, they would be persecuted as well.

And so it will be for us if we decide to follow Jesus.

One commentator wrote,

“Not all of Jesus' hearers could literally follow him on his travels. But all could practice his way of life, a way of forgiveness and prayer ... a way which renounced xenophobia toward those outside Israel and oppression of those inside ... Ultimately the challenge Jesus offered was the challenge of a crazy subversive wisdom in which ordinary human wisdom and conventional Jewish wisdom would be stood on its head.

To take up the cross and follow Jesus meant embracing Jesus' utterly risky vocation ...”

Don't think that the church is a place of spiritual nirvana. The church is not where we go to get away from it all. The church is not the place we go to escape the problems of the world.

The church is where we go to embrace the problems of the world in the name of Christ. Christ calls us to embrace the hunger and the sorrow and the conflict in our own hearts and in the world. It is in the travail that we find hope. It is in our hunger that we find the bread of life.

## FINDING GOD IN THE STRUGGLE

Think about the stories of the Bible. Are they about a people who have reached a state of spiritual calm and settle happily in the Promised Land? No.

These are a people who misunderstand, betray what they believe in most deeply and generally run from God's will whenever they get the chance.

In other words, they're just like us.

And that's okay. Because we see in the Bible that God's response to these faithless disciples is a love that will not let them go. God feeds his people. God delivers his people from slavery. God sends his Son into the world with a message of forgiveness and salvation.

There is only one requirement if the people to receive this Divine Grace.

They must recognize their need. They must have a hunger that cannot be filled with bread alone. They must recognize the deep sorrow in their lives that only God's forgiveness can heal. They must understand that it is more important what God thinks of them than what others think about them. And they must be willing to go where God leads them.

### A CHARGE

Today we ordain and install new officers. And I can't think of a better charge for them (and us) than the charge contained in this passage.

We have been called to seek God's will on behalf of the church. We are not called to please the people of this church by merely reflecting the majority opinion. Our task is more difficult.

We are called to seek the mind of Christ. We are called to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit as revealed in Scripture. If necessary we may even be called to be in conflict with others in order to tell the truth about God's word.

We are called to be leaders with a vision. Our vision is based not upon human plans but upon God's plan. We are called to believe in a time when heaven and earth will be judged by God. We are called to imagine a time when wrongs will be made right, a time when the downtrodden will be lifted up and the high and mighty will be knocked off their high horse.

But, this doesn't mean that all ministry waits for that future. We use this future vision of God's judgment and justice as a guide for present action. It gives us hope when the odds seem stacked against us. Faith encourages us to believe despite evidence to the contrary.

Our priority will not be to make this church the most successful organization in town. Our task will be to make this church faithful to her unique calling. Our task will be to embrace a lifestyle and a ministry that is in line with the teachings and ministry of Jesus. And so we are challenged to feed the hungry, comfort those who sorrow and have the courage to speak up for the poor and dispossessed.

It will never be an easy task. Often we will fail. But, as Mother Teresa once put it, "God does not call us to be successful, but God does call us to try."

The will to try is in itself an act of faith.

Brothers and sisters are you willing to try?  
Are you willing to take one small step in faith?

The blessings of God are not found in getting what we want when we want it.  
The blessings of God are found in the struggle of service.

May God give us all the faith to try.

Amen.