

A Message of Hope
Luke 6:17-26
February 17, 2019 – Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

In academic circles, the scripture you just heard is called “the blessings and woes,” and it is indeed a difficult passage. The blessings are difficult, for it is hard to feel blessed when you are poor or hungry or weeping. But, for many of us, the woes may be even more difficult as we read what appears to be a condemnation if we are well off or full or happy. So let’s take a closer look at “the blessings and woes.”

First, anyone reading the blessings can’t help but draw a parallel to the beatitudes of Matthew, Chapter 5. But notice... Matthew says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” But Luke... I’ve said before, Luke is the social Gospel. Luke is all about the poor, the underdog, and the outcast. So, for Luke, this is not a spiritual thing. Luke puts it out there: Blessed are the poor, period. So what in the world does that mean? Is there anybody here that ever thought it would be a blessing to be poor. Yes, I have heard it said that there are blessings in not needing to worry about how our 401K is doing, or whether we should be investing in stocks or bonds; but it is certainly no blessing to be wondering where your next meal is coming from or whether you will be homeless next week. So what’s the blessing on the poor, the hungry, the weeping? In one word – Hope.

I mentioned in my children’s moment the pocket token that Ginny, my wife, gave me this Christmas. It has a cross on one side; but, on the back it says, “Do not fear, I am with you always!” I really appreciate this, especially as I head into retirement. Yes, I’m looking forward to retirement, to having the time to do at least some of the things that I’ve always wanted to do and never had the time to do. And, of course, I’ve done a lot of work to insure that I can financially afford to retire. And still, I need to tell you, it’s just a little bit scary – not being sure what the future will hold or where the Spirit will lead, not being sure where the call of Christ will take me. But I have the reassurance of Jesus Christ. “I am with you always.” How many times have I told you that the most important verse in the entire New Testament is this last verse of Matthew: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” I don’t apologize for that, and I can assure you, you’ll probably hear it a few more times between now on July 1st; because we, neither you nor I must ever forget that.

Friends, that’s what the blessings are all about. . . reassurance. I don’t particularly like the “pie in the sky, by and by” routine that tells the poor or the downtrodden, “Don’t worry, things will be better when you get to heaven,” and while there is seemingly a certain amount of that in these blessings, I also feel there is reassurance in present, the reassurance of Christ in this life. There is always hope for those who believe the good news of God’s amazing love.

The Methodists of the eighteenth century, those early followers of John Wesley were the folks these blessings address. They were the poor foundry workers, the subsistence farmers, and even the former convicts. Many would regularly turn to gin to drown their sorrow; because gin was cheap. As the saying went: “You can get drunk for a penny and dead-drunk for two.” But John Wesley and the preachers that were his disciples ministered to these folks. They preached, they prayed, and they lead them into what today we might call skilled co-opts. And, you know the biggest problem Wesley had toward the end of his life? His Methodist has climbed out of the ranks of the poor. They were experiencing prosperity; and Wesley and his preachers weren’t quite sure how to deal with that. They knew how to minister to the poor; but ministry to the middle-class was quite another thing. You see, even in the most difficult circumstances, in Christ there is always hope. That’s the story of the blessings – bringing hope to the hopeless. The blessings say, “Have faith, for Christ is with you.”

But, perhaps on a more personal level, what do we do with the woes? I’ve told you before the story of sitting in a seminar on The Gospel of Mark. Our seminar group included one United Methodist minister, four college professors, and two religion students. We got to the story of the Rich Man in Mark, Chapter 10. Jesus tells the rich man to sell all he has, give the money to the poor, then come and follow him; for it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.

To that, one of the professors stated somewhat jokingly, “We don’t need to worry about that. Professors will never be rich.” Our seminar leader responded, “Compared to your neighbors, maybe not; but compared to the rest of the world, we are all very rich.” I will never forget that, for I know it’s true. Compared to the average person on this planet, we are all very rich; and I fully believe we are all called to steward our riches wisely for the furtherance of humankind.

I also don’t see these woes as a total condemnation of wealth or food; and certainly not as a condemnation of laughter. I actually have a wallpaper border in my house that says, “Take time to laugh; it is the music of the soul.” However, the woes are a caution against finding our meaning and abundance in temporal conditions rather than in the promises of God. Wealth, fullness, and fun must not distract us from a reliance on God for true meaning of life.

I have a minister friend who, in his previous appointment, had a neighbor across the street. His neighbor would spend every Sunday morning in his driveway, polishing his red corvette. Now, there is nothing wrong with owning a red corvette. There is nothing wrong with enjoying, even polishing a red corvette. But, this man virtually worshipped his red corvette. His whole life was wrapped up in that car. It was the most important thing in the world to him. Indeed, he found his joy in temporal things, instead of in the way of Jesus Christ.

And speaking of cars. . . I have another friend who stopped on a highway to help a woman who had a flat tire. The woman explained that she was driving her

husband's car, a vintage automobile with shiny chrome wheels. My friend volunteered to change the lady's tire; however, the car had locking lug nuts, and she needed to call her husband to ask him where the key was. After talking to him, she handed the phone to my friend saying, "He wants to speak with you." When my friend took the phone, the husband said, "I understand that you're going to change a tire for my wife. I want you to know, if you scratch one of those chrome rims, you are in deep trouble." I tell you that man found his joy in all the wrong things.

Friends, it's no coincidence that the woes immediately follow the blessings. It's an intentional contrast. What this passage really says is "woe to those who are rich and disregard the plight of the poor." All too often we, and I say "we" because I'm as guilty as the rest of us. . . All too often we enjoy our own comfort and privilege while we know brothers and sisters still suffer. All too often we enjoy the security and prosperity of this great nation while we know that brothers and sister are literally mourning and weeping under the scourge of violence and poverty in neighboring countries. How often I have wondered what the world would be like, and how the world would view the United States of America if we were to take half our military budget and instead put it into worldwide humanitarian aid. Now I know that isn't going to happen, and it's probably not realistic; but I still wonder. What if our country launched a new "moonshot" – this one to end hunger world-wide. Now a lot of people are saying, "Oh we couldn't do that"; but I ask, would that really be more difficult, would that really cost more than our 1960's "space race" to the moon.

No that isn't going to happen; and why not? Because we as a nation don't have enough faith and hope to make it happen. And that is not a political statement. That lack of hope is true of both Democrats and Republicans. But I tell you, you and I may not be able to end world hunger; but we can, and we are doing a good part to end hunger in North Olmsted, Ohio. Through Oxcart Food Pantry and our Community Meal and Laura's Home Meal, and Harvest Partners we are bringing hope to the poor, the hungry, and the weeping. And through our support of the greater church, we are making at least a dent in these problems worldwide; and that's why I'm a United Methodist.

Friends, I would not expect any of you to sell all you have and give the money to the poor so you can follow Christ. Making yourselves poor does not solve a poverty issue. But I do hope each of you will regularly ask yourselves, as I regularly ask myself, "Could I be doing more? What can I do to bring hope to others without dashing my own hopes.

Jesus is always with us to lead us, to guide us, to show us the way. May we have the courage to follow where he leads.

Let us pray. . .

Most holy Lord,

Give us the courage to follow.

May we always know the hope that you provide,
and may we always seek to bring that hope to others,
as we share your goodness and your love.

Amen.