

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 13, 2022 (6th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C)
Luke 6:17-26

As I was studying our reading from the Gospel of Luke for today, I was reminded of something I read once. I think those of you who teach or HAVE taught can relate to this, as I do as an Affirmation teacher. It goes,

“Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said:

Blessed are you who are poor.

Blessed are you who are hungry now.

Blessed are you who weep now.

Blessed are you when people hate you on my account.”

Then Simon Peter said, “Are we supposed to write this down?”

And James asked, “Will we have a test on this?”

And Bartholomew asked, “Do we have to turn this in?”

And John said, “The other disciples didn't have to learn this.”

And Judas asked, “What does THIS have to do with real life?”

Then one of the Pharisees asked to see Jesus' LESSON plan and asked, “What are your COGNITIVE OBJECTIVES here?”

And Jesus wept.

I think that's HILARIOUS. But, I DO have ANOTHER reason to share that with you. Even though it's just a joke, I think it still ILLUSTRATES something: a LOT of the time, like CHILDREN in the CLASSROOM, when JESUS TEACHES us, we are JUST NOT LISTENING.

Jesus KNEW his subject WELL. Jesus DIED POOR. Roman soldiers cast lots to divide among themselves Jesus' ONLY possessions – the clothes on his back. And he looked at his disciples and said, blessed are you who are POOR.

Jesus DIED HUNGRY. There's no record that Jesus had ANYTHING to eat the day of his death. What we call The Last Supper on Thursday evening may VERY well have been Jesus' LAST meal. He died on the cross at sunset on Friday with an empty stomach. And looking at his disciples, he said, “Blessed are you who HUNGER now.”

Jesus DIED WEEPING. AFTER his last supper, Jesus headed for the Garden of Gethsemane, where he PRAYED and where he WEPT. He told his disciples you are BLESSED when you weep.

Jesus DIED HATED. Caiaphas, the HIGHEST religious AUTHORITY in Israel, called him a BLASPHEMER. The crowds wanted a MURDERER freed before they would see JESUS pardoned. And looking at his disciples, he said, “Blessed are you when people HATE you on account of ME.”

You see, Jesus doesn't have any ROMANTIC notions about the POOR here. He describes poverty like the people on that plain could RECOGNIZE it. The POOR, the HUNGRY, and the WEEPING were THEM. And YET, he calls them “blessed.” Jesus TEACHES us something PROFOUND here, but somehow, we COMPLETELY miss the point.

Let me give you an example. I know a pastor from the deep South who gets REALLY upset when she reads this text, because in SOME places in the South, they USE Jesus' words to KEEP people poor. They tell them that God BLESSES poor people, so they should be HAPPY to live in their SHACKS. It's CLASSISM and RACISM, DISGUISED as religion, and it's DESPICABLE.

That's NOT what Jesus meant. To say that the poor are BLESSED DOESN'T mean that God WANTS people to be poor. God blesses the poor and the hungry and the sorrowing PRECISELY because they NEED God's blessing the MOST.

A theologian named Gustavo Gutiérrez said it best. He wrote: “God has a PREFERENTIAL LOVE for the poor, not because they are necessarily BETTER than others, morally or religiously, but SIMPLY because they are POOR, and living in an INHUMAN situation that is CONTRARY to God’s will.”

There’s ANOTHER way we can miss the point here: we can put OFF God’s blessing to the END and say, “They’re weeping NOW, but when Jesus RETURNS, when the kingdom of GOD comes, THEN they’ll be laughing.” I guess there’s SOME comfort in knowing that you’ll be rewarded LATER for your suffering NOW, but I don’t know how MUCH. I mean, how comforting can a FUTURE promise BE when you’re STARVING?

I heard a story once about a peasant who had not EATEN for days, and he didn’t have any WAY to GET any food, so he went to one of the big landowners to ASK for something to eat. The landowner was glad to help, and he took him out to his fields, where there were HUNDREDS of fruit trees, and the fruit was READY to eat. But BEFORE he would LET him eat, the landowner wanted to TELL the peasant about his fields and his trees and HOW he grew his fruit. When he finally finished, and turned back to the peasant, he wasn’t THERE. He’d left and gone to ANOTHER one of the landowners. The peasant couldn’t HEAR the landowner’s words because he was HUNGRY; he couldn’t LISTEN until he was FED.

Jesus knew that. Notice that in this story, Jesus healed, or FED, people BEFORE he told them the good news.

The day of the kingdom is STILL COMING, but there has GOT to be MORE to God’s blessing than some pie in the sky, by and by idea of the FUTURE. There has to be SOMETHING of the kingdom of God for the HERE and NOW.

And the GOOD NEWS is that there IS. In Jesus, and in the work of his CHURCH—that’s US—we can SEE it, we can see the LIGHT of the kingdom beginning to be revealed, even if only for a FEW BRILLIANT MOMENTS.

That GLOW makes ALL the difference. I SAW that glow when I was just a little kid in the sixth grade. One afternoon, my little brother and I were riding the bus home from school, and as we came over the hill just before our house, suddenly the bus slowed down and pulled over onto the shoulder. And a moment later there was great collective GASP, as every kid on that bus saw the SAME thing I did—my HOUSE was on FIRE. Half of it was already gone. And before the fire was done, ASHES was all that was left, NOTHING BUT ASHES. We lost EVERYTHING. And we didn’t have any insurance, so it was permanent – it was ALL GONE.

But that very SAME night, members of the CHURCHES in Mahtowa started BRINGING us things: blankets, clothes, shoes, food. In a couple weeks, they had a benefit spaghetti dinner for us. We stayed in my grandparents’ BASEMENT for the next few months and the churches BROUGHT us things to make it feel like a HOME, like BEDS. And when we finally COULD rebuild, our entire church came out EN MASS and FRAMED our new house in ONE weekend. And individual members CONTINUED to help until it was DONE. I was just a kid, but I’ll NEVER FORGET what those churches DID for us. It’s one of the reasons I’m a PASTOR today. I saw with my own eyes the church at its BEST.

THAT’S what a BLESSING is. A blessing of God comes THROUGH the PEOPLE of God, DOING God’s will. It comes from the people of God having a VISION of the kingdom and WORKING to MAKE it happen. And at the very LEAST, that means that the poor should be HELPED, the hungry should be FED, and the sorrowing should be COMFORTED. THAT’S what a BLESSING is. The kingdom of God has already BEGUN – in US, in the work of the CHURCH.

We COME to this place every Sunday to catch a GLIMPSE of that kingdom, to catch a glimpse of what God WANTS to do here. We come to get a FORETASTE of the kingdom, and let it SHAPE our dreams for the FUTURE. God BLESSES us, and blesses this CONGREGATION, so that WE can bless OTHERS. As the saying goes, we are BLESSED to BE a BLESSING.

We're MAKING the kingdom of God right HERE and right NOW, EVERY time we HELP someone, every time we FEED someone, every time we COMFORT someone, even if it's something as SIMPLE...as a KIND word, or a TOUCH on the SHOULDER.

And the WONDERFUL thing is, in GIVING a blessing to OTHERS, WE TOO are BLESSED by GOD. Amen.