

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

February 16, 2025 (6th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C)
Luke 6:17-26

A man walked into a bookstore to return a purchase. "It's a Bible," he said, handing it to the clerk at the cash register.

"Was it a gift?" asked the clerk.

"No, I bought it for myself," he said, "and I made a mistake."

"Did you not like the translation? Or the format?"

"Oh no," the man said, "the format was clear and the translation was fine. I just made a mistake."

The clerk said, "Well, I need to write down a reason for the return."

"In that case," said the man, "write down that there's a lot in that book that's tough to swallow."

There are some passages in the Bible that ARE tough to swallow. This is ONE of them.

The editor in chief of Christianity Today, Russell Moore, recently told NPR in an interview that multiple evangelical pastors had told him that when they would quote the Sermon on the Mount when preaching, someone would come up after the service and ask, "Where did you get those liberal talking points?" When the pastor would say, "I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ," the response would not be, "I apologize." The response would be, "Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak." Moore said. "When we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as (weak) to us, then we're in a crisis."

The words of Jesus Christ are a lot of things, but WEAK is NOT one of them. Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Plain, that we just read, are NOT WEAK. "Woe to you who are rich. ... Woe to you who are full. ... Woe to you who are laughing. ... Woe to you when all speak well of you." Woe isn't a familiar word to us now, but it's a STRONG word. It's like a CURSE – as if Jesus is saying "You're GOING TO HELL!" If anyone thinks THAT'S WEAK, they're making a MISTAKE.

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."

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 often 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 people, and later he FEEDS 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 MUST 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 once in a flood. I lived in Moose Lake in 2012 when the town was flooded. I woke up that morning to find that the lake had risen 3 blocks to my back yard. But the lake wasn't what concerned me; what was happening in my basement was a problem. The sewer pumps had failed, and there was raw sewage backing up into my basement right through the drains. Our little sump pump was no match. We hauled everything out as fast as we could, and then we watched the dark nightmare climb the basement steps.

But then we got a phone call. One of the members of my church had a pump he wasn't using. He asked if we needed it. He had no idea how badly we did, and how much of a God-send he was. It ran for a couple days.

And then we got another call. Another member who lived outside town asked if we could use a shower. Another God-send.

And all the while, my congregation became the emergency center for the community, providing supplies and meals from the Red Cross and Samaritan's Purse.

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.

This is so much MORE than just AVOIDING the WOES that Jesus pronounces, MORE than just AVOIDING HELL; this an OPPORTUNITY to BE THE BLESSING, to CHANGE our WAYS, to BECOME something BETTER.

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.