

Year C Sixth after Epiphany Luke 6, verses 17 to 26

Right before the words we hear today, Jesus has been on the mountain with James, and Peter, and John and they witnessed Jesus being transfigured by the glory of God. After this experience, Jesus comes down from the mountain.

Whereas Matthew's Gospel has Jesus preach his sermon from the lofty mountain, Luke brings Jesus down among the people – on a level place – sending us the clear message that Jesus is one of us, dwelling among us, caring for us from a place of relationship with us. Jesus, on the plain, is surrounded by a clamouring throng of people from Jerusalem and Judea, Tyre and Sidon. Listing these widespread places is Luke's way of letting us know that what Jesus is about to do, what Jesus is about to say...is for everyone – Jew, Gentile...doesn't matter; poor, sick, in trouble...doesn't matter. What Jesus offers today is for everyone.

Imagine the scene...Hordes of people have gathered around Jesus to see him, to hear him, to be healed by him. Jesus is curing people of their diseases. He is casting out unclean spirits. People are crowding around him, dozens upon dozens of dirty, diseased hands all reaching in on him all at once because, if they can just touch him, they will be healed. The power of God the Holy Spirit is at work – power is flowing out of him. And Luke tells us that Jesus healed *all* of them. Just imagine the excitement in the air, imagine their singing of praises, imagine their joy. Imagine the awe inspired by the staggering display of God's power flowing from this man and on that note...

Jesus looks up at his disciples and he begins to teach them and boy, does he teach them. Jesus turns their world upside down. He says to them, "You see what I just

did? People call them the dregs of society...the poor, the diseased, the outcast...and they have inherited the kingdom of God.”

They have been shunned by society and Jesus loves them, he heals them. Jesus gives them the way back into the circle of their communities, and Jesus welcomes them into his kingdom.

Did you notice that Jesus looks up at his disciples? Jesus is down among the people – the unclean, the unaccepted – and looks back up at his disciples because they have not joined him in this. Jesus spells it out for the disciples and for everyone who holds exclusionary views about God’s kingdom.

Blessed are the poor...but woe to the rich.

Blessed are the hungry...but woe to those who are full.

Blessed are the weeping...but woe to those that are laughing.

Blessed are those rejected because of me...but woe to those who are accepted.

This is eye-popping for the disciples, positively jaw-dropping. It is the exact opposite of everything they had been taught. It is important for us to know that the word Jesus spoke, the word the disciples heard when Jesus said, “Blessed”, is the Hebrew word *barak*. Barak is used to mean blessing because it’s literal meaning is “on your knees; kneeling”. Why the connection to blessing? Because the Hebrew people showed respect and admiration and praise and adoration by falling to their knees. To bless God is to adore God which also means that when God is blessing us, God is adoring us. To the confusion of the disciples, and to the delight of the marginalized, Jesus declared to them that God adores the poor, the hungry, the sick. And this, is the exact reverse of how they think the world works.

In their world, if you are rich, God is smiling on you. If you have lots of possessions and good health, well, God loves you. You are really pleasing to God and God is showering you with blessings. This is, very much, the way we have been trained to think.

In contrast, if you are sick, that is God expressing his displeasure. If you lose all of your money, God is angry with you about something. If you are born with some sort of physical impairment, well, you or your parents must have sinned and God is punishing you. More than 2000 years later, we actually haven't moved far from that thinking. Some people thought the COVID pandemic was God's doing to punish sinful humanity. Some people with personal troubles and sickness feel angry with God, betrayed by God.

In this story today, Jesus is clearly telling us this is not the way things work in God's kingdom. Being blessed by God does *not* mean our lives will be all sunshine and roses. We do live in a broken world surrounded by broken people after all. But this brokenness does not mean that God is punishing us and the world for sinfulness.

Jesus is making a powerful statement about the way the world works and the way it should work in the fullness of God's kingdom.

Now, let's make sure we know what Jesus is *not* saying: If you have money, and possessions, and lots of friends, you are not automatically bad, you're not automatically turned away from the kingdom. And if you're poor and rejected you're not automatically good and "in" the kingdom either. Jesus' words are hope-filled promises to the marginalized and words of warning to those distracted from God by the riches and glory of the world. They are being called to live with

attention and generosity toward their neighbours just as God is attentive and generous.

Let's listen in to Jesus' words more closely...Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the rejected. Certainly, there are people who have made bad choices in life and end up in dire circumstances of their own devising but, what is often the case is that society's structures have put them there and keep them there. What is worse is, we are so much a part of those structures that we often don't even realize we are part of them. A number of years ago, there was an alarming number of murders of indigenous teenagers in Thunder Bay and questions about how the police were handling these cases. And so, an independent investigator looked into it. When they released their report about The Thunder Bay Police Force, it was not surprising that they found evidence of systemic racism among many members of the police force. What *was* surprising was that the report said those police officers were *not* consciously aware of their racist tendencies. The racism was so deeply imbedded that it was no longer noticed. It was the way their world worked. Racism is just one of the ugly blots on our society. It may shock you to learn that, when asked, the majority of Canadians will tell you that poor people are lazy. If they worked harder, they could get ahead. They're squandering their money on cigarettes and alcohol. Maybe some poor people are lazy but the statistics say that many people living below the poverty line in Canada are working multiple jobs. Our world is not working the way God intended it to work. C.S. Lewis wrote a trilogy called *Cosmos*. And, in that trilogy, when angels appeared on earth, to the human eyes looking at them, those angels seemed tilted. The angels seemed to be standing at

an angle rather than straight up and down like us. But it was not the angels who were crooked. It was our world.

To the people in charge, in positions of privilege who do nothing to change, to those who are keeping our world crooked, Jesus gives them a warning today. Enjoy what you've got, he says. Enjoy your worldly wealth and happiness because that is all you get. Jesus proclaims the same message that God spoke through Jeremiah in our first reading...Those who put their trust in the world for their strength are like shrubs in the desert. They don't notice the relief sent to them.

Jesus proclaims that relief today. Jesus *is* that relief. Jesus gives hope to the victims of society. Jesus heals all of them and then explains...In my kingdom, he says, there will be no injustice, no oppression, no sickness, no inequality... the hungry will be filled. The weeping will laugh. He speaks of a wonderful, perfect future but...Did you notice the one time that Jesus speaks of the present time? "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours *is* the kingdom of God." Yours is the kingdom of God. Our crooked world makes it easy for us to forget that Jesus brought God's kingdom here among us. As Christians we live with the paradox – God's kingdom is here, God's kingdom is coming. It means that Jesus brought the beginning of God's kingdom in its fullness and now we await its perfection, the full revelation of that kingdom.

Dominic Crossan puts it this way in a quotation I've shared before and will most certainly share again. He writes:

"You have been waiting for God, Jesus said, while God has been waiting for you. No wonder nothing is happening. You want God's intervention, he said, while God wants your collaboration. *God's kingdom is here. [You must] accept it, enter it,*

*live it, and thereby establish it...*The Great Divine Cleanup will not happen without God, but neither will it happen without us. It is about a divine-and human collaboration and not about a divine-only intervention.”

Jesus’ list of blessings and woes puts a choice in front of us. We can live in the world and have the world for our reward or we can live in God’s kingdom, putting our trust in God and receiving God’s blessings. We will be fed. We will be joyful. But we also need to collaborate. When John the Baptist knew God’s kingdom was coming he commanded us, “Make straight all the crooked places where the Lord our God may go.” Imagine what we can do together to straighten out our crooked world.