

**“The Gospel in Black and White”**

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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.

## CROWDS SEEK A BLESSING

In today's lesson Jesus once again attracts a crowd.

The word has spread about Jesus.  
And so people come from all over...  
...from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

They came from different places,  
but they all wanted the same thing.

They all wanted to hear Jesus speak.  
They all wanted him to heal their diseases.

They all wanted him to bring peace  
to their troubled minds.  
They wanted him to drive out the demons  
in their life.

They wanted to touch Jesus,  
and to be touched by Jesus.  
They wanted Jesus to bless them.

And he did.  
Jesus gave the people what they wanted so desperately.

The Bible tells us that  
the "power came out from him",  
and he healed all of them...every last one.

Isn't this what we want as well?  
Isn't that why we come to worship?

We want to hear Jesus speak.  
We want him to heal our diseases.

We want him to set our troubled mind at ease.  
We want him to expel the demons  
that threaten to possess us.

Those blessings we can understand.

But, in today's lesson, after Jesus heals everyone, he talks about blessings in a way that is quite puzzling.

## HARD TO UNDERSTAND

Jesus said,

“Blessed are you who are poor...  
 Blessed are you who hunger...  
 Blessed are you who weep...  
 Blessed are you when people hate you...”

Who wants those blessings?

Do we really want to be poor?  
 Do we really want to be hungry?

Do we really want to be overwhelmed with sorrow?  
 Do we really want people to hate us?

What kind of blessing is that?

We surely wouldn't want the blessing of being “poor”.

If we had our druthers, we would have Jesus say,

“Blessed is the one who matches all six numbers in the Florida lottery for she will be a millionaire.”

We would want Him to say,

“Blessed is the one who knows how to win friends and influence people.”

How can we understand this passage?

What was Jesus saying to these disciples?

How can poverty, hunger, sorrow or conflict be a blessing?

## PREACHING TO THE HEALED

I must admit that this passage has puzzled me for a long time.

But, this week I noticed something in this passage that seems to help.

The people to whom Jesus is preaching have all been healed.

The Bible tells us that the “power came out from him and healed all of them”.

All of them.

So, in a sense, Jesus is preaching to hungry people who have been fed.

Jesus is preaching to poor people who have been enriched by the promise of the gospel.

Jesus is preaching to people who have had their demons expelled.

Jesus is preaching to people whose tears have been wiped away.

The people who heard this message were pre-blessed.

They were blessed because in the presence of Jesus their poverty and their hunger and their sorrow did not define them.

Instead, those broken places in their life created a path for the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom.

Some people think that the blessings of God are defined by our circumstances.

If we are well fed, rich, and have it all together, then God is on our side.

Indeed, an early incarnation of the prosperity gospel was popular in Jesus’ day.

Good fortune came to those  
who deserved God's blessing.  
Bad fortune came to those  
who had sinned in some grievous way.

To say it another way, many in Jesus' day believed  
that blessings are reserved  
for those who deserve them.

Blessings are reserved for those  
who come from the right family  
and do the right things.

But, that's not what Jesus believed.  
When all kinds of people showed up from all over,  
from "all Judea, Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre and Sidon" what did Jesus  
do?

Did he just heal those who deserved to be healed?  
Did he just heal those who were from the right family or country?

No. He healed everyone.  
They were all blessed.  
The only qualification for a blessing from Jesus was a need to be blessed.

This was what the Kingdom of God would look like.

Everyone would be healed.  
The hungry would be fed.  
The poor would be lifted up.  
Those who were filled with sorrow would learn to laugh again.

## HARD DAYS AHEAD FOR THE DISCIPLES

In verse 20 we learn that these challenging blessings are directed specifically  
at a certain group. Disciples.

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.”

These blessings are specifically  
for hard pressed disciples.

And the disciples would need those blessings.

Luke wrote another book that’s in the Bible,  
The Acts of the Apostles.  
And in that book we learn that the apostles and the disciples of Jesus faced  
these very challenges.

The story of the first disciples is a story of poverty, hunger, sorrow and per-  
secution.

The disciples did indeed give up everything  
to follow Jesus.  
For example, last week we learned  
that they left their boats  
and their fishing nets  
and their family 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. (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.

## SACRIFICE FOR A GREATER PURPOSE

And yet when Jesus looked at them he pronounced them blessed.  
Their sacrifices, their sorrow, their hunger and their poverty had a purpose.

They may be poor now,  
but one day they will inherit the kingdom of God.

They may be hungry now,  
but one day they will be filled.  
...filled not only with food but with the bread of life.

They may be overwhelmed with sorrow now,  
but one day they would laugh again.

As the Psalmist puts it,  
“Weeping may linger for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.”

They may undergo persecution today,  
but one day (as the prophet put it)  
justice “will roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an overflowing stream”.

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 a kingdom that comes.

“Hunger, sorrow, poverty and persecution  
would not have the last word.”

And I believe this is the promise  
that Jesus offers us as well.  
Hunger, sorrow, poverty and persecution will not have the last word in our  
life either.

## WOES

But, in Luke's gospel, there is not only a list of promises for those who struggle,  
there is also a list of threats for those who are too comfortable.

For every blessing there is a contrasting woe.

“Woe to you who are rich  
for you have received your consolation.

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.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

This is what makes our lesson for today a real challenge to preach.

In Luke's gospel Jesus not only  
blesses what we hate;  
he also curses what we love.

He seems to present the world in black and white with no room for nuance.

But, I would suggest that sometimes we need the gospel in black and white.  
Sometimes we need to consider the blessings and the woes together.

There will be times when we experience the dark side of life.

At times we might be poor or hungry or filled with sorrow or rejected by others.

At times like that we will need a word of comfort.  
We will need to be reminded that the Kingdom of God is coming.

There will come a time when we will be fed.  
There will come a time when we will laugh again.  
There will come a time when justice will be done.

But, sometimes we will get too comfortable.  
Sometimes we will equate success with divine approval.

Instead of seeking the consolation of God's promises, we will trust in material goods.

Instead of seeking the bread of life,  
we will just settle for bread.

Instead of (as the Psalmist put it) "numbering our days" and gaining a heart of wisdom,  
we will just fill our days with mindless entertainment and laughter.

Instead of having the courage to stand up for justice and righteousness,  
we will go along to get along.

We will embrace a prosperity gospel and try to eliminate the cross, the cost of discipleship.

In the life of every disciple these two temptations are present.  
When things are going badly there is the temptation of despair.

When things are going well there is the temptation of complacency.

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?

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.

But, satisfaction is an illusion.

All of us have a hunger in our life that even the blue plate special can't satisfy.

And if we don't have a hunger for the right things, we will never be fed those things that will really nourish us spiritually.

People who have a diet that consists mainly of junk food tend to overeat. Why?

Well, the food they eat doesn't provide the nutrition their body needs.

And so they are never really satisfied.  
They don't get what they are really hungry for.

And they eat even more of the things that are not good for them.

This is also true in a spiritual sense.

We try to meet a spiritual need  
with food, wealth, fame...you name it.

It won't work.

There really is a God shaped hole in our heart that only God can fill.

## JESUS AFFLICTS THE COMFORTABLE

The preaching of Jesus comforts the afflicted.  
But, the preaching of Jesus also afflicts the comfortable.

And if we have decided to follow Jesus,  
that often means that we too will have to leave our comfort zone.

We too will be called to speak a truth that is hard to hear.

Jesus put it this way,  
"Woe to you when all speak well of you,  
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

False prophets are popular because they tell people what they want to hear.

In contrast, Christ tells us what we need to hear.

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, in every age “upsetting our apple cart.”

## THE GOSPEL IN BLACK AND WHITE

I love the way 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)

Truth, God’s truth is at the heart of the gospel.

We believe that in some things,  
there is black and white, right and wrong.  
And like the prophets of old disciples,  
we are called to preach that truth.

We are called to stand for that truth...despite the consequences.

William Sloan Coffin, a prophetic preacher who often ruffled many feathers wrote,

“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 ...”

When we really love someone,  
we are willing to tell them the truth  
...even when that truth is hard to bear.

Jesus loves us that much.  
He tells us the truth, even when that is hard to bear.

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.

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.

For it is in the struggle that we find hope.  
It is in our hunger that we find the bread of life.

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? Not at all.

The story of the Bible is a story of people who misunderstand God's will, betray what they believe in most deeply and generally run from God whenever they get the chance.

In other words, they're just like us.

And yet this very human story is also a story of salvation. Why?

Because the "steadfast love of the Lord never ceases". God loved His people with a love that would not let them go.

God delivered them from slavery.

God fed them in the desert.

God even sent his Son into the world with a message of forgiveness and salvation.

The blessing of God comes with only one requirement.

We must recognize our need.

We must realize that we have a hunger in our heart that cannot be filled with bread alone.

We must recognize the deep sorrow in our lives that only God's forgiveness can heal.

Amen.