

Jesus calls both poor and rich

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey
at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, February 17, 2019
The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (year C), Luke 6:17-26

Luke 6:17-26 (NRSV): Jesus came down with the twelve apostles 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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,

for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,

for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,

for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 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.”

“But 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.”

Many of you have had the experience of sending students off to college. Others of you were sent to college yourselves, or perhaps you look forward to the day when you will go off to school. When parents send their kids off to college, they send them with blessings and warnings, all in hopes of helping them thrive. To the students who are constantly stressed about the next test and the need to succeed, parents offer assurance. It’s going to be OK. You are prepared for this. It will be hard, but you can make it. We are here for you even if you fail; we will help you back on your feet.

Parents also offer advice and caution. Sometimes students have coasted through high school without working hard, and they face a rude awakening when college steps up the challenge. And sometimes the same student needs both reassurance and advice and caution. The advice and caution probably comes from the parents’ experience, and out of love and a desire to spare their kids the challenges parents faced when they were in school. College is harder. Grades won’t come easily. With less structure, it will be easy to get behind. If you don’t pay attention to your work, it won’t end well.

Parents send students off with blessings and warnings. Each part comes from a deep and compassionate love for their kids, wanting the best for their kids in this next chapter of their lives.

Jesus is doing something similar with his disciples in today’s Gospel reading. This reading from Luke is similar to another scene of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew called the Sermon on the Mount. In this case, Jesus is in a level place, so we call this the Sermon on the plain. Like most traveling

preachers, Jesus repeats some of the same themes. But in this case, his words are more blunt, and he sets up a polarity of blessings and woes. In Matthew, we read about Jesus' words 'blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers.'

Here in Luke, Jesus says 'blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the despised and unpopular, those just like the prophets.' Then he adds woes, matching every item on his list of those blessed to a list of those he tells "woe." 'Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full, woe to you who laugh, woe to you who are popular now, for the false prophets were popular too.'

When we think of these beatitudes, we often think of ethics. It sounds as if Jesus is praising one kind of behavior and denouncing another kind of behavior. His words are certainly related to behaviors, but they are not so simple as a list of rules. Otherwise, we would think that Jesus wants us to go out and try to be poor, to try to weep all the time, to try to go hungry all the time, or to try to be despised and rejected. That would be odd indeed. No, this is not so directly about ethics as it is about assurances and warnings. Jesus calls both poor and rich.

Now, there are two common mistakes that preachers can make when preaching on this passage. The first is to lash out and rail against the rich, calling the rich evil, and clarifying them to be the bad guys we all know they are. The second mistake is to say, "oh, no worries, Jesus is talking about *bad* rich people—like those rich people over there, not *good* rich people like us!"

Each mistake is so easy to make, so tempting and attractive. The first draws on our frustration with the rich who have so much when we have struggled to make ends meet and still struggle. It is so easy to want what the rich have and to feel a sense of injustice that we don't have those things too. But of course, if we judge people because they have more than we do, that could be so prejudicial. We could be assuming so much about their heart and their faithfulness simply based upon their access to resources. Jesus sought out wealthy people as well as poor people. He does not call them evil and turn away.

However, we should not make the second mistake either. We can dodge and come up with loopholes and justifications to avoid the discomfort we might feel when we hear these words. Woe to you who are full; woe to you who laugh. When we have enough to eat, and when we are happy, we feel good about ourselves, and we want that for ourselves. So now, we feel nervous and self-conscious, and we easily want to get out of the scrutiny we feel from Jesus.

While it would be so easy to dodge Jesus' words, I think that we need to face them squarely. We need to come to grips with the risks that we face when we have plenty, and when we feel influential and popular with things going our way. Especially when others face need, are powerless, and constantly face challenges out of their control.

You have to admit that riches and ease often make us complacent and prideful. If you start a business and it struggles, you blame the economy or the expensive regulations or the cheap imports. But if the business does well, how easily we say "look at this great business I built! I'm a genius!" The same thing happens in churches. When attendance lags, we blame Sunday soccer practice and secularism. But when the finances look great, we feel proud of ourselves. And in that pride we overlook God's call to serve and grow more deeply into our mission.

While riches can be employed in the service of God, riches so often bring with them temptations, especially temptations to serve ourselves and to want more and more for ourselves while becoming more and more blind to the needs of others. When we have plenty, we indulge ourselves from a comfortable distance from those in need, so we become blind to those in need and in no position to be in relationship with them.

Popularity is always a seductive force, just look at social media. But it has such powerful risks for us spiritually. So Jesus warns us of this trap as well. Popularity makes us proud of ourselves in the spotlight. But fame is fleeting, and fame sometimes requires us to soft-pedal our fidelity to God in order to preserve our position. Celebrities and public figures have to pass social litmus tests on their religion or they are made outcasts. So we get misled by the voices of popularity just as the false prophets did.

Jesus doesn't just offer words of assurance. Like a parent who wants the best for their kids going off to college, he offers assurance, but also sends warnings as well. Jesus calls both poor and rich.

So what do we do with these warnings, especially if we have resources, as so many of us here in this church do? I think that Jesus wants us to surrender everything we have to God. I'm not talking about living on the street with nothing. I'm talking about giving God the ownership of all we have. Then follow God's direction of what to give and what to save and what to spend and how to spend. Follow God's priorities, which are wider than just our own households. Take off of the throne of our lives the sense of security we have in money and things and reputation, and put God on the throne. Then indulge in generosity, feast on sharing, and seek out relationships with those in need. Jesus calls both poor and rich.

Look at the context of this passage. Jesus started his preaching with some confrontations with the Pharisees, then he chose from among his disciples the twelve apostles. Then he comes down to the plain to where the crowds are. He heals and restores and frees people. Then—look closely—Jesus “looked up at his disciples and said,” blessed are you who are poor, hungry, weeping unpopular... and, we assume, *still looking at his disciples*, he said, woe to you who are rich, full, laughing, and popular. Jesus said all of these things *looking at his disciples*. Jesus is beginning his ministry, and bringing his disciples with him to share in that ministry. Jesus isn't looking at those *other* people over there, he is looking at his disciples. He is looking at us.

So Jesus is not rejecting us, whether rich or poor. He has no assumption about good or evil based on our wealth. But he does have assurances for us when we struggle, and he has warnings for us when we do well. Jesus, like a parent sending a student off to college, wants his disciples to thrive and to bring grace—not just for themselves, but for the world around them. Jesus wants them to be willing to sacrifice their own privileges in order to share God's blessings with the world. Jesus calls the poor and rich of his disciples to be faithful disciples.

So when you come to God, come expecting what the crowds expected and received. They were healed, they were restored, they were delivered and set free. Also come knowing that God is healing and restoring you for a new life. God sends you into the world with warnings for the traps of the riches of this world, and assurances for his grace greater than any hardship you will face.

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