

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

I Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

02/17/2019

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

17[Jesus] came down with [the twelve] 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. 18They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20Then 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. 23Rejoice 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

### **Woes**

Good morning! I'll be honest, this sermon won't be easy. But to make sure you know that I'm in the same boat I'll share some about my own life. I like things. It seems that when I was created the universe conspired to create the perfect mix of consumerist values and the belief that I NEED to have the best and newest stuff. Take camera gear for example; every year some new lens or camera body comes out and they convince me

that my old Nikon needs replaced. Or computers! It's the same thing! Every year Intel puts out a new CPU and Apple updates their lineup and a part of me is convinced that THIS is exactly what I need to do the very demanding tasks of browsing the internet and listening to music...

And so it may surprise you that today's Gospel reading is one of my favorites. It's a favorite because of the way that it challenges me. I have never known poverty, and could be considered rich by the standards of the whole world. So when I hear the "woes" that Jesus speaks against the rich in this text, it pushes me to think through the ways I live and how God is probably calling me to change.

Our text today comes from the Gospel of Luke and begins what we have called "the Sermon on the Plain." You're probably more familiar with The Gospel of Matthew and the "Sermon on the Mount" that we find there. We call them sermons but they're really just a long series of teachings that Jesus delivers at one time. In the Gospel of Matthew that "sermon" takes up an astounding 109 verses, whereas in the Gospel of Luke the "Sermon on the Plain" takes up only 30 verses. This has meant that the poor Gospel of Luke is often overlooked. The bulk of our message today concerns a collection of beatitudes and woes, and if you look up the word beatitude in both [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com) and Merriam-Webster you will see that it mentions "Matthew's Sermon on the Mount" but says nothing about the Gospel of Luke!

Well, starting today we're going to fix that. When we encounter Gospel readings on Sunday mornings one week at a time it can give us the feeling that the stories aren't connected. But next Sunday's text will pick up right where today's reading ends. It's important to remember that this is one teaching from Jesus. Hopefully, by the end of

next week you'll have a new-found appreciation for the lesser known "Sermon on the Plain."

First we need to set the stage with some background information. The mountain was a holy place. For most religions of the day the mountain was where the gods lived. The mountain was especially important for the Jews. Jesus comes down off a mountain to "a level place" where he starts teaching. This would have seemed awfully familiar to the Jews in the crowd who would have been reminded of Moses coming down the mountain to deliver the Law. In some way, that's exactly what Jesus does: he comes down off the mountain to deliver a message from God on how we are to live.

This is probably why the writer of Matthew has Jesus deliver this teaching ON the mountain top. But the Gospel of Luke is especially committed to putting everyone on a level footing and understanding. That's why the writer uses the plain instead of a mountain. Anyone can come and hear the word of God, there is not partiality. In fact, there's probably a sermon somewhere in there on making our spaces more accessible to those with unique needs, but that's for a different day. The geography is important, especially a little detail about where everyone comes from in verse 17 tells us that people are coming from ALL over Israel to hear Jesus. One commentator notes that "*Luke may be saying that Jesus' ministry and message are for all.*"<sup>1</sup>

The word Beatitude that we usually associate with churchy stuff is wonderfully defined by [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) as "supreme blessedness; exalted happiness."<sup>2</sup> And so Jesus is proclaiming words of "supreme blessedness and exalted happiness" to those who are

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1990. p 86.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/beatitude>

listening. Luke Timothy Johnson does a wonderful job of breaking down the structure of the lesson, and he writes the following: *“Luke’s Beatitudes and woes have the same internal structure. The middle two members of each set describe present conditions of need or comfort that will be turned about in the future. The outer statements in each set describe present realities which are paradoxically transformed by the perspective of the kingdom. The rich who represent the secure and powerful are rejected by the prophetic ‘woe,’ but the poor who represent the outcast and need are said to possess the kingdom. This pattern of acceptance and rejection is mirrored... in the final blessing and woe.”*<sup>3</sup> The structure is very different from the Gospel of Matthew which has nine blessings and no woes. In our reading today, we have a balance of four blessing and four woes.<sup>4</sup>

So that’s the structure and background. So now we move on to the tough part. In Matthew, the writer spiritualizes the blessings and will use phrases like “blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke doesn’t chicken out, and it’s another reasons this text is so powerful to me. Luke writes about real problems. Alan Culpepper writes that *“They speak to real socio-economic conditions rather than to spiritual conditions or attitudes, and they declare God’s partisan commitment to the poor and the oppressed.”*<sup>5</sup> God has always been concerned for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the child, the alien, and the prisoner. It’s a message that we hear over and over again throughout the Bible. Gustavo

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Luke T., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1990. p 87

<sup>5</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VIII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p.117.

Gutierrez, a liberation theologian writes that *“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. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God’s agapeic love.”*<sup>6</sup>

Did you catch the nuance of what he said? It took me a long time to realize that Jesus isn’t talking about the DESERVING poor, those whom we have decided have worked hard enough or suffered unjustly because of someone else and so they deserve the extra money. No, God has a preferential option for ALL the poor, not just those who we think deserve it!

Man that hurts right! So what do we do?! I find it especially ironic that we arrive at this text on the Sunday that we celebrate a gift from a deceased member in excess of \$100,000. It’s a harsh reminder of the ways God calls us to use our gifts. I think this text is good news to the poor because it promises them something more than the mess of what they have now. The bad news for the rich isn’t that God will punish us, but that we’ve already punished ourselves. Our worth is self-defined by what we can possess and consume, and so the joys of the Kingdom of God bring us no happiness. It’s like spending our whole lives in the dark, only to step out into a bright summer day. The light HURTS!

I mentioned that I love this text because it challenges me. So I’ll share a story. When I went to Haiti for my cross-cultural class in 2013, missing my first anniversary by the way, we went with the Rev. Dr. Daniel M. Bell Jr. Dr. Bell is the professor I most

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<sup>6</sup>Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VIII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. pp. 119-120.

admire from seminary and we had an interesting exchange. One day in the middle of the week the two of us were alone as he washed his hands after a long day of work on a church. He was complaining about how sore and tired he was, so I said if you're so tired, why keep doing these trips?! Don't you like them? (He took a trip to either El Salvador or a place like Haiti at least once a year.) He replied "I don't like these trips, I hate them!" I was confused! These trips were hallmarks of his teaching and ministry at the seminary. "Well, why do you do them then?" I asked. "Because if I don't, nobody else will. And somebody has to bring you down here to see the truth," he replied.

Little by little God is changing the world, going against what everyone else would say is "right" or "smart." We can witness God's amazing activity in the world, pronouncing the Good News of Jesus Christ for the those who need it the most. What a blessing that is. Amen.