

Daniel 7:1-3,15-18

Psalm 149

Ephesians 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-31

Woe is me! I am saddened and distressed that I am unable to think of any way to introduce the message in this morning's gospel that will grab your attention or make the sermon memorable. Woe is me, indeed! There is no personal anecdote to illustrate the point that Jesus is trying to make to his disciples...and thus to us. What has just come out of Jesus' mouth is enough to make any of us in this room just a bit uncomfortable. Here is Jesus clearly saying, "Blessed are the poor...the ones who are destitute" and "Woe to you who are rich." There are three more pairings along this line in this gospel reading and they don't get any better. Blessed are those who are hungry now" and "Blessed are those who weep" and "Blessed are you when people hate you because of me." But "woe to those who are full now" and "Woe to those who are laughing now" and "Woe to you when people speak well of you." It all sounds pretty straightforward, doesn't it? But we are learning, aren't we, that Jesus' teachings are rarely straightforward. There is nearly always a hidden message in what he says and it's up to us to decipher it. Sometimes, it's a little bit like searching for Waldo. What we think we just heard was Jesus saying "God's going to take care of the poor, the hungry, the mourning and the outcast" and those that are rich, full, laughing and respectable are going to be sorry. So, what's wrong with being rich, full, laughing and respectable? Why should those of us who are comfortable end up being sad? Things are pretty good. We should enjoy! Is Jesus suggesting that the reign of God operates as a zero-sum game in which every winner corresponds to a loser or every one of today's pleasures will get repaid with a punishment tomorrow? Hold onto that questions for just a minute....because I don't think so...and here's why.

Remember, this particular passage is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He has just been up to the mountaintop and has chosen his disciples, so this is his first real teaching to them and to all those who have gathered to listen. But here's something to think about. If the kingdom of God is among you as it was for the disciples both then and for disciples in the present, then the blessed and the woe statements are something for people to experience *in the present*. Hm.m.m.m.m.....Think about that and hold that thought. Jesus is not just making an eschatological statement. Jesus is talking about the here and now...in real time...today! Hold on to that thought at well.

There are a few of things we know about Jesus' teachings in the gospels and about Luke's gospel in particular. Jesus is rarely as straightforward as he seems and we know that the gospel

of Luke is literally riddled with reversal situations from beginning to end. This passage is no different. And it deserves our scrutiny. Last week we heard about the righteous Pharisee and the sinful tax collector and that story ended up being a bit of a trap for all of us. In these words from Jesus, it would be easy for us to gloss right over Jesus' real message and leave here feeling a bit chastised because we are not poor, hungry, grieving, and isolated.

So if we're not being chastised for being comfortable, what *is* Jesus' real message? Well, let's take a look. We know that Jesus is always going to elevate and uplift all of those at the bottom of the heap. That's part and parcel of his mission which is: to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind; and to let the oppressed go free. And from time to time, Jesus is prone to say to people "The kingdom of God has come near." He's bringing the kingdom of God to folks so that they can experience it and emulate it in real time....on this earth...*now!* The kingdom of God is real and it is in the 'here and now' for anyone who is encountering Jesus. Anytime we've had a mountaintop experience, anytime someone unexpectedly comes to our rescue, anytime something has warmed our hearts and made us feel peaceful...any time we have felt truly loved, we have come close to the kingdom of God. These experiences happen to believers and non-believers alike. The difference is, the believers see and experience God. The non-believers chalk these things up to coincidence or the randomness of the universe. Coming to know Jesus is all about coming to know the Kingdom of God which is not at all like the world in which we live now.

Jesus brings satisfaction and belonging to those who suffer from poverty—which includes more than the people who lack money but also the powerless and the disenfranchised. We are never closer to God or more aware of Jesus than during those times when we are at our lowest points. Our awareness of God in those moments is key to understanding the blessed and the woe messages in this gospel. During his life on earth, Jesus showed us the wonders of the kingdom of God and he showed them to us in concrete terms. He created *community* and expects us to do likewise. His ministry feeds the hungry, with the wondrous deed he performs in feeding the five thousand and his penchant for eating with others. It also lays a foundation for the hospitality and meal-sharing that are hallmarks of the community he creates. The people who cry, who live in perpetual loss and grief and who have lost hope, will not be forgotten but will experience the kind of joy we see when Jesus raises the widow's son at Nain; when he raised the little girl who died and whose parents had sought out Jesus; and when he was taken up into heaven at Bethany. Whatever tragedy has befallen us in this life Jesus has already lifted it up and overcome it. Through him we are connected to the kingdom of heaven. Through him we are part of the community of believers on both sides of the veil who embrace the kingdom of God. We are part of the community of saints that we celebrate today....for those that have died continue to live and continue to live in our hearts and in our memories.

They are never very far from us. And all of us who follow Jesus Christ are part of this community of saints regardless of the size or frequency of our transgressions. There is no doubt that God must be pleased when we obey his commandments, but we've already discovered that we can't earn our way into the kingdom of heaven. It is God's gift to us. We simply need to be aware of God's presence and step into it.

At the end of this passage Jesus gives us our marching orders. He tells us exactly what he wants us to do to help usher in the kingdom of God. Right off, he says, "Love your enemies" and "Do good to those who hate you." That's a pretty tall order and one that most people really struggle with or completely ignore. But this is what we need to do if we are to participate in ushering in the kingdom of God. And he says, "Bless those who curse you" and "Pray for those who abuse you." These are not just hard, but impossible orders to follow. Does Jesus realize he is asking us to buck every natural instinct we have? Probably. He's now living in a human body himself in a confining world. He knows what he's asking. And he holds the power to help us do all of it if we so desire. As if these weren't enough he tells us that if anyone strikes us on the cheek we are to turn the other cheek instead of striking back. This initially sounds like such a weak position to take, but think about how much strength it takes not to retaliate. It's easy to hit back...physically or verbally...but it takes incredible character and discipline to pass up that opportunity. Have you ever tried to hold your tongue in the heat of anger? Then you know it's hard. Jesus knows all this even as he's telling us what he wants us to do. He knows it's going against the grain. He knows it's going against instinct. He knows this is not what we want to do! And then he says, "If anyone takes your coat, give him your shirt as well." "Give to everyone who begs from you." Do you suppose he means those folks who hang out in the retail malls begging for money in the parking lot or the folks with the cardboard signs that stand in the median near the traffic lights? Yes, I expect so. He means those folks. And then he adds, "If anyone takes something from you, do not ask for it back." And last, but not least he says to us, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" A friend of mine, who is an atheist, once said to me, "If everyone who professes to be a Christian actually did all the things that Christians are supposed to do, the world would be transformed." Bingo! That's it! The world would then be the kingdom of God which we are all anticipating.

The *communion* of saints—that intimate unity we share through Christ with one another, including those who have finished their race—creates a *community*, a new social reality. Jesus' sermon describes that community as odd. Its values do not match our life experience, in terms of who typically experiences happiness and how. Nor do these values conform to the cold logic of cost-benefit analyses. Jesus calls the church to do more than act differently or see the world differently. He calls us, each of us, to a new existence in which God's generosity benefits the downtrodden. That generosity creates a culture formed and sustained by the mercy of God.

Woe to those who are missing opportunities to experience tangibly the giving and receiving of that mercy. It's sad for them.

Rich, sated, carefree, and respectable people can share immediately in the new existence God has instituted, but only to the degree to which they participate in Christ's calling to enter into true solidarity with those who find themselves destitute, underfed, mournful, and vilified.

Woe to those of us who refuse to risk that solidarity. It's not that we are going to be punished because we are comfortable now. It's just that the natural outcome is a sadness that we are simply going to miss out on by not being part of the world Jesus is describing. What blessedness we are missing. Being comfortable is not a sin; it's a distraction. Unless we work very hard and intentionally, the comfortable life steers us away from the very kingdom that Jesus is describing which has come near to all of us. Will we join in by following our marching orders?

With God's help, each one of us will.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.