

The Sixth Sunday of Epiphany—
St. Luke 6:17-26
February 17th, 2019
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

God's Blessings in Disguise

Today Jesus speaks the Beatitudes to the assembled multitude. These bring good news of blessings to those who are sick, troubled, grieving, poor, imprisoned or hungry. It is a message of real hope. Woes are also spoken to the rich who live at the expense of the many poor folk who suffer so that the rich can live in luxury.

Do we count our blessings? I try to each morning. I always feel pretty lucky after I do. What I thought I lacked, I already have.
'Blessed is Chris, for God loves him.'

Life does not always let us feel so blessed. For some of us, there are patches where we only feel blessed with problems. For many others, the blessings are few and far between.

Consider some of the people who visit our Mobile Foodshare pantry. Many are retired, or people who can no longer work. They worked hard all their life, yet it didn't amount to very much. Living paycheck to paycheck was a struggle, and now it is even tighter living with disability check to disability check, or social security check to social security check. No pension. No investments. Just trying to pay the rent and utility bills. Not much left over after that. So a blessing, a hand up is a visit from the Foodshare truck. There was a time in life when all of us, including these folks were too proud to accept a handout, but somehow, pride dissolves away when your survival depends on the food you can rustle up from whatever sources you can find.

And there are those who through age or disability or both can hardly carry their groceries to the car. How often have I seen one of our volunteers offer to help them carry their loads of groceries for even a short distance? Small blessings can really matter when you desperately need them.

Every other Tuesday morning is a small blessing in these lives. It is doing something. It is hearing a human cry. It is responding to the words of Jesus you just heard today: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be filled." Tuesday morning is hearing these words of Jesus and trying to make them happen. It is offering a cup or bottle of cold water to someone who is thirsty on a hot day.

When I stand in front of the congregation at the end of the service today, I am not the only one with the ability to bless others. There is a lot of blessing going on here at St. George's, if you want to pass along those blessings you have received. With every outstretched arm handing over some vegetables or a loaf of bread goes a blessing.

Too few people it seems in our world have a sense of the acute needs of those around us, until maybe they become one of them. As I thought of sitting and listening to Jesus' words in his sermon, I thought of God bringing hope to these situations:

- Loss of a job
- Loss of a home due to fire or finance
- Sailing on a sinking ship
- Facing illness, serious illness
- Facing health crises
- Loss of money
- Loss of a marriage
- Loss of relationships
- Income won't stretch anymore, leaving you hungry
- Facing poverty
- Life is falling apart
- Your assumptions are falling apart
- You are in serious trouble

Now we go back and put the little word hope or blessing in front of each of these situations, for hope can be found with God's help in the darkness of despair:

- Hope and blessings found in the loss of a job
- Hope for a future in the loss of a home due to fire or finance...Receiving many blessings to help you
- Hope when sailing on a sinking ship that you will be saved or spared!
- Hope facing illness, serious illness
- Hope facing health crises
- Hope (and maybe a blessing)when you lose money
- Hope and a blessing on the loss of a marriage
- Hope and a blessing on the loss of relationships
- Hope and a real blessing when your income won't stretch anymore, leaving you hungry
- Hope and a real concrete blessing when facing poverty
- Hope and the ability to see blessing when life is falling apart
- Blessing when your assumptions are falling apart
- Blessing and hope when you are in serious trouble

To those who have not tasted these human struggles, who lack empathy and compassion for those less fortunate than themselves, to those who won't toss a life preserver to someone who is drowning, Jesus addresses His woes. Whether from ignorance of the human condition, or willful choice to ignore it, the woes of his sermon are then addressed: woe to those whose actions and choices hurt others, even unwittingly and unintentionally. Woe. Woe to those who find themselves in this situation, for it is more perilous for the soul than the deepest poverty, than the worst failure in life. Woe to those who are deaf and blind to the human need around them and who party on at the bar enjoying their cigars and drinks while the Titanic is sinking.

The disparity between rich and poor has been a centuries old problem for humanity. Who is really rich today? Who is really poor? The wisdom and logic of God turns these standards and assumptions completely upside down. Are you a rich person? Are you blessed?

Blessings many times appear in disguise. Loss of a job may seem that way, but in hindsight, I found it to be a blessing that improved my health, and left me feeling happier with my life than I did before. Michael Gates Gill, in his book, "How Starbucks Saved My Life," writes of how he fell from a life of privilege and wealth as an advertising executive at J. Walter Thomson on Madison Avenue in New York, to working as a barista at Starbucks. That his journey was a difficult one to say the least, is an understatement. At the end of his journey he found happiness and peace and satisfaction he never knew in his life at the top of the 'heap.' He learned humility and many other things that served him well in what he calls his new life of service to others. I commend his book.

Blessings in disguise. We often come to remove the disguise in hindsight and find the blessing revealed. Psalm 23 is so familiar to me, that until 16 years ago I never understood the depth of what it was speaking to me, and how it would become a daily prayer to utter in the morning. Some of the most painful losses and troubles in my past life have become the cornerstone of a new life for me. I will witness to finding the blessing of God in them to move me back onto the right pathways for his name's sake, as the psalm prays. I know I am not alone in the Valley of the shadow of death, as frightening as it can be. It has also helped me count my blessings, the abundance of which run over the cup God has served me, like a frothy pint of draft beer that cannot be contained in its glass. I have found comfort in that psalm as God's blessings are revealed in it to me. Check it out! AMEN