

St. James UCC Havertown, PA
February 17, 2019 | Luke 6:17-26
Rev. Emily Garcia Livingston | “A Surprising Lesson”

There are times when preachers read the lectionary texts for the upcoming week and say...OOUUCH...Oh my...really God?? This is what I have to work with this week? And yes, there are other passages to focus on with every grouping of lectionary readings; and yes, many congregations have no issue with the preacher using a different text altogether; however, some passages need to be tackled and wrestled with, as difficult as they may be. I am ever grateful to the Holy Spirit who is able to guide us in this sacred work, so bear with me.

I'm sure most of you have heard of “The Beatitudes” and the “Sermon on the Mount.” Well this week's Gospel passage is related to these. It is known as the “Sermon on the Plain,” because of where it took place. There are several interesting things I want to point out about this passage. The first is that Jesus' disciples are more than the “12 apostles.” We see that Jesus actually has a following of disciples *before* He calls out the famous 12, who will be among his closest followers. Jesus speaks to this crowd of disciples, including a great multitude of other people. Clearly some who had not yet given their allegiance to Jesus were attracted by the rumors of his teaching and amazing healing power. These folks wanted to hear more and see for themselves. Some of them also wanted healing. They came from great distances, as far south as Jerusalem and as far north as Tyre and Sidon.

The second thing of note is *where* this teaching took place. Jesus talks to these people on level ground – hence the name, sermon on the plain. He speaks to them not from a distance or elevated on a mountain, but on the same level with the people. They are accessible to him, and He to them. Earlier in the chapter we see that Jesus had actually just been on a mountain praying where He called the group of his disciples to him and where He selected 12 of them to be his closest followers. After selecting the 12, they all came down from mountain so that Jesus could be closer to the rest of the people. The third item of note is that Jesus uses language with his disciples that is personal. He speaks to them directly...Blessed are *you*...For *you* shall...and so on and so forth.

This reminds me of something I shared this week with one of the people I supervise. It's "annual performance evaluation" time and one of the managers who reports to me and is entering his fourth year. Now for the past three years, he's written the reviews of his staff in first person. This year, for no particular reason, he decides to write them in third person voice. So when he gave me the paperwork to look over, I took the opportunity to coach him around his choice of "voice." I shared with him that writing annual reviews in 3rd person can create psychological distance between him and his staff. I encouraged him to write the evaluation "to" the person...not "about" the person. The impact of this seemingly minor point will help him build upon the rapport that he's worked to establish with his staff. It's simply a more personal way of relating to the people you supervise and it goes a long way towards building trust.

Similarly, we see Jesus speaking in a very personal way to this group. Jesus uses the word "you" instead of "they." Most of the people gathered among Him are the poor, the sick, and the marginalized of society. These are not people with prestige or power. These are people who are struggling to make it day to day. These are people who would not be treated with dignity by many people, especially those with authority and yet, here is Jesus making a point to assume a vantage point of equality among them.

We don't know how long they've been following Jesus but He knows these people. He knows their suffering, their pain, their desires, and their dreams. He feels their needs, and their pain and speaks to them, in their situation, directly. He doesn't avoid the reality of their existence; He doesn't sugar-coat it; He doesn't deny it; Jesus speaks to where they are currently, and He sees them as they are. And what Jesus shares with them turns the norms of their day upside down.

Jesus begins by blessing them and these blessings are immediately followed by warnings. Jesus knew his audience. He knew that there were disciples in the crowd as well as folks who were there just to witness a spectacle. He knew that there were people in this crowd who believed in him and others who despised him. He wanted to comfort and encourage his disciples and He also wanted to warn those whose loyalties and devotion were to things that displeased God. What we need to remember is that while Jesus is speaking *to* the crowd, He's directing this message *to*

his disciples. Verse 20 reads: “Then He lifted up His eyes *toward* His disciples...”

These blessings are for his disciples and I don't believe that Jesus was speaking to them allegorically about being poor or hungry or depressed. Many of these disciples were poor, hungry, and depressed, and they knew that they were without resources. They heard Jesus' teachings and were compelled by the Gospel to follow Him. They wanted what Jesus offered. He wasn't offering them material things but they longed for what He had. They came to rely on God because they had nothing of their own on which to rely. They came to Christ not solely out of their physical needs but they *wanted* Christ in their lives because of their spiritual needs.

When Jesus says, “Blessed are *you*, poor, for *yours* is the kingdom of God; I don't believe Jesus was elevating one socioeconomic group above all others nor do I believe that He is blessing poverty as an ideal condition. I believe that Jesus is speaking directly to the condition that his disciples are in, they are indeed poor, and he's encouraging them by telling them that the kingdom of God *is* theirs ...right now!

Living in constant poverty is not a spiritual blessing. It is traumatic. It is a form of violence. And it is something that weighs on a person's spirit and emotions who is living in poverty, which can consistently chip away at hope. Being poor can certainly cause you to also be “poor in spirit.” It can certainly cause you to be depressed and despondent. It can bring you to tears as you try to live in a world where you can never seem to make ends meet. Where, when you think you can take one step forward, you are actually pushed 4 steps back and the vicious cycle continues over and over and over again.

Every other blessing Jesus shares with his disciples in this passage has a future time when it will be manifested, but not the first one addressed to those who are poor. This blessing is for every poor disciple to know that the kingdom of God is theirs RIGHT NOW! What an awesome blessing that must have been surprising for them hear and receive...that in their suffering, in their lack of resources, in their daily struggle to make ends meet, in an oppressive government and society, the Kingdom of God *is* theirs and they belong to God!!!

Jesus continues with blessing those who are hungry; those who weep; and those who are persecuted because of their faith in Him and then He hits them below the belt with shocking warnings to those who are rich, those who are full, those who laugh, and those who are not experiencing any persecution. On face value, these are very difficult words to hear and to understand. Is Jesus really condemning *all* people who are rich or *all* people who aren't hungry or *all* people who laugh??

The answer is: "NO." Jesus is not condemning all people in those categories but He is providing all of us with social commentary. Jesus is deliberately and radically switching the world's values completely around. His strong words reject the status quo -- the materialism of society -- and warns those who are materialistic that severe judgement is coming. The excess, greed, selfishness, hatred, abuse of power, and devaluing of human life were all factors in the society that Jesus lived in which contributed to the pain, oppression, and poverty that existed among the people. As in Jesus' time, those same factors: excess, greed, selfishness, hatred, abuse of power, and devaluing of human life are at play in our world and in our own country today.

Let me say clearly that Jesus does not condemn people who have wealth simply because of their wealth He's condemning an attitude, a way of being, a way of interacting in the world that can affect people with means because the more money you have, the easier it is for you to feel that you are self-sufficient; that you are self-made; and therefore, you don't *need* God. You can also gain more power with wealth and so you can begin to misuse your power. Instead of helping people with your wealth, you have the potential of hurting people.

There is a tremendous blessing with being wealthy. You have the capacity to impact so many lives for the better. You can choose to use your wealth to bring about justice and equity; to ease the suffering of others; to impact lives in positive ways; and to ultimately serve God. Wealthy people have an opportunity to do amazing things in service to Christ and Jesus is reminding them of this.

Today, Jesus is challenging the ways of our society and the particular roles we play in it. How are we serving God through our living in 2019? Have we allowed materialism to creep in or get in the way? Are we not content with the blessings around us and driven to want more and more? Do we

judge people for the zip code they live in? Do we treat other people better simply because they drive a certain make and model of car or have a certain profession? What are our values and have we matched them up with what God values??

Jesus doesn't want us to be disciples out of sheer obligation or because we have a need that He can address. Ultimately, He wants us to follow him because we've been transformed by His love and we confess that we *want* to be with Him. I believe all human beings have an innate spiritual desire to connect with their Divine Creator. Once we have accepted Christ's invitation to follow him as disciples, we will *want* to be with Him because we can't imagine our lives without Him. Discipleship is not easy. We will experience suffering along our journey because of our decision to follow Christ but be encouraged Beloved of God. Jesus is with us every step of the way. God is still speaking. And God is calling us for such a time as this.

May we accept the surprising and hard lessons Jesus teaches us with the grace He so lavishes upon us. And may we have the courage to be the disciples He's calling us to become.