

Luke 6:17-26

You know, I didn't want to preach on the gospel today, I tried not to because who wants to be poor? Who wants to be hungry? Who wants to cry? Who wants to be hated because you believe in Jesus? I don't know about you, but this is not good news to me. And seriously, if you are one of these individuals, do you want to be told that "It's ok, everything is going to work out in the end"? I could be wrong, but I don't think many of us in this room today have experienced living below the poverty level, but Pastor Lundwall, who serves lunches at Holy Trinity, sees poverty every time the people walk in the door to have a meal. She said it would be, well, almost cruel to say these things to the people who eat there.

So, why did Jesus preach this? Luke didn't tell us, as Matthew did, that it is the poor in spirit who will find blessing. Luke says it is the poor. When Jesus announced these blessings, he was speaking to shock and amaze; to reverse the way of the world; to turn the world's values upside down.

Most of us consider wealth to be a blessing. But Jesus doesn't see it that way in this week's gospel lesson: "Blessed are you who are poor," he teaches the crowd, "for yours is the kingdom of God." Then, a little later, he has these choice words for the wealthy: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

This is Luke's version of the Beatitudes. It's strikingly different from Matthew's better-known version. To begin with, it takes place in a different location. In Matthew, it's the Sermon on the Mount, and in Luke, it's the Sermon on the Plain. But the biggest difference for Luke, compared to Matthew, is that Luke includes statements of woe. Not only is Jesus blessing the poor, the hungry and those who weep; in Luke's version, Jesus preaches woe to the rich, the satisfied and even those who laugh. Luke raises troubling questions: Is it wrong to be rich? Is it a sin to be successful? And what is wrong with laughter?

We could say that Jesus is preaching to his audience. If this is a gathering of common folk, of the poor and nearly poor, then what better way to gain their favor than to criticize the rich? However, Jesus is doing more than simply telling the people gathered there what they want to hear. He's speaking a great spiritual truth. It has to do with the nature of blessings.

In times of trouble, a well-meaning friend may advise us to: "Just count your blessings. Look on the bright side. Concentrate on the good things in life; look away from the bad!" That's not such bad advice, but the world is always eager to count material blessings. How blessed are they, with the house they live in, the car they drive, and all the high-tech gadgets they have to play with. Even those who have little in the way of material goods are quick to count what blessings they do have.

The world has its own set of beatitudes, in contrast to Jesus' list: Blessed are the rich; the famous; those who have big houses on the beach. Blessed are those with perfect children who have their photo on the cover of People magazine. Blessed are those who know what they want — and take it!

As Luke tells it, Jesus has no time for any of this. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus turns the world's values upside-down. He blesses those whom the world calls accursed, and he preaches woe upon those whom the world admires. If you think about it, the Beatitudes Jesus is preaching are revolutionary!

Jesus' words may cause us discomfort. Yet in our deepest moments of clarity and insight, we realize he's right. We understand that "money can't buy happiness." Good health can't buy happiness, either; there are people who've never spent a day in the hospital, yet who seem not to enjoy an ounce of self-esteem. A happy family life, a meaningful job, creature comforts, and leisure time to pursue hobbies do not guarantee happiness either. You can have all of them and still feel empty inside.

When Luke reports Jesus saying, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation," it's a very unusual Greek word he uses for "consolation." It's a commercial term that means, literally, "having received what is due." It's the rubber stamp at the bottom of an invoice that reads: "Paid in full." Those who have all they need and hoard it to themselves without concern for the poor have been paid in full. They've been given much in this life, but they won't receive a penny more, woe are they.

The wonder of God's power to bless is that it happens regardless of our circumstances. Helen Keller despite being blind, deaf and mute triumphed over her disabilities. She wisely pointed out, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it." God's way of blessing us, sometimes, is not to remove the cause of our complaint, but to give us power to prevail over it. It's like the remark of the philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson: "It is the wounded oyster that mends its shell with pearl."

Who's to say what's a blessing and what's a curse in the great scheme of things? From our human perspective, what looks like the greatest of calamities may, in a God's-eye view, really be our salvation. There's an old story — a true one — about a man who had a hard life. When he was 7 years old, his family was evicted from their home. When he was 9, his mother suddenly died. At 22, he lost his job as a store clerk.

He'd always wanted to go to law school, but his education wasn't good enough. He went into business instead, and at age 23 became a partner in a small store. Three years later, his partner died, leaving a huge debt that took him years to repay. At 28, he asked the woman he'd been courting for years to marry him. She said no.

For a moment, his luck seemed to change. At 37, he was elected to Congress on his first try! But then, two years later, he was voted out. At 41, his 4-year-old son died. At 45, he ran for the Senate and lost. At 47, he failed as the vice-presidential candidate. At 49, he ran for the Senate again and lost. Then, at age 51, he was elected president of the United States. His name was Abraham Lincoln.

It really doesn't do us much good to count our misfortunes. The Bible, in Romans 8:28, promises that "all things work together for good for those who love God." Somehow, we've got to learn to trust that word, as hard as it may be to do at times.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor ... the hungry ... and those who weep," he's bearing witness to the truth that God is in charge of creation, and that God isn't finished with us yet. God will inevitably bless us if we have faith. God may bless us some day with what we most desire. Or, perhaps more likely, God may bless us through what we desire but don't receive.

Although counting our blessings can be important, it's the blessing itself that counts: God's blessing, that stays with us through wealth and poverty, health and sickness, laughter and tears. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and blesses us in every circumstance!
All glory be to God.