

Sermon – February 13, 2022
“Blessed are you who ...”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Luke 6:17-26

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning. Our text this morning is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. It is a time when Luke focuses on Jesus’ teaching and begins to share with the readers of his Gospel what people had been hearing taught by Jesus in Galilee. Most of us are familiar with the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew’s Gospel. Did anyone memorize the Beatitudes? There are many similarities between these two sermons, but Luke’s focus is on what a Gentile audience would understand from Jesus’ teaching.

Let me put this morning’s reading into its context so we will understand where we have entered into Luke’s Gospel. Jesus has just spent the night in prayer on this mountain. I encourage us to write that down or find and underline that verse in the scripture. Jesus has not just prayed to God for guidance for a few minutes, but has talked with the Father all night. My personal experience is that if I pray late at night, I wake up the next morning having fallen asleep while I prayed. Jesus grounds everything he does in deep prayer to the Father, prayer that can take all

night, but with the coming of a new day, gives him the strength and guidance needed for ministry. If you asked me what one thing we might take away from this morning's sermon, I would suggest this image of Jesus in deep prayer over decisions that needed to be made for his ministry. If we could hold up that image of Jesus in prayer and adopt deep prayer into our own decision making, I think we would move forward differently in our ministries. Jesus prayed and we as his followers should also be those who are found often in prayer to God. Following this time of prayer, Jesus came down the mountain and chose the twelve disciples. After making those choices, Jesus moves to a time of healing people in the crowds, and then begins to teach those in the crowd and his disciples. Notice that the great crowd is not just from Galilee, but includes all of Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. Luke makes the point that Jesus' teaching is not for Israel alone, but for the Gentiles as well. Also notice that before Jesus teaches, he heals the people, not just a few, but all. This is not to say that Jesus will heal through us. He might, but we are to include in our ministry acts of compassion and mercy for those we are sent to as a church. We are not here just to teach, to share God's word, as important as that is, but to be the living body of Christ in this place to all who have needs. We cannot meet every need as Jesus does, but with prayers for guidance, we can allow Jesus to guide us by the Holy Spirit to those he is seeking to reach through us with the provisions that he has placed in our hand.

Notice in verse 20 the words, "Then he looked up at his disciples." Other translations may have the "lifting up of his eyes." This is an expression that occurs in many places in the Bible. It speaks to Jesus' divine attention focused on these disciples as he teaches. What we have hungered for thus far in Luke's Gospel, to know what Jesus teaches in the synagogues in Galilee, we now began to hear. As I started working on this sermon, I was reminded of a story about a gathering of college students interested in Jesus in which a noted youth speaker was engaged to come and bring the keynote message. The day-long worship was at its peak moment and the speaker, with great expectation from all, came to the podium, opened his Bible, read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to the gathered body, and when we finished, he closed his Bible, gave thanks to Jesus for these words, and left the podium. Many said it was the most complete sermon they had experienced. So, thank you Bobby and Diane for your reading this morning. I should probably follow that example and pray and sit down. Just these few words of the sermon we have

heard this morning began to speak to our hearts and alert us to something new and different that draws us in and stirs our hearts as the word of God shines on us.

I also recalled that John Wesley frequently preached on the Sermon on the Mount. And I thought, “What a resource! Let me go and read what John Wesley had to say.” He is said to have preached on the Matthew version some one hundred times. In the standard set of fifty-two of Wesley’s sermons, there are seven sermons or discourses on the Sermon on the Mount. I did not have time this week to read all of those sermons. But it does make the point that this teaching of Jesus is key for our own understanding of what Jesus taught his disciples. We as followers of Jesus need to seek to grasp what Jesus is teaching and shape our lives and our church’s ministries around these words. Now, I am not going to be able to cover all that is here this morning, and so we will return to these texts often so that we might grow into the fullness of Christ.

When I think about people who are blessed, I often think about people who have received economic, material, social, and spiritual blessings. Those with material blessings are those whom we typically think of as the rich, those who have been blessed in this life. We find this concept of blessing connected to God’s action in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 28, as example, where the blessings identified are consistent with material blessings from God. But here in Jesus’ teaching, we find a different idea of blessings, an idea that is the opposite or reversal from what we expect. Jesus speaks to blessings that are found in the kingdom of God for those who are poor, hungry, weeping, and hated. Those who are rich, full, laughing and spoken well of are those who will face woes in the kingdom of God. Woe is not a word we use often today. Woe is not a good thing. Woe is great sorrow or distress. It is a primary expression of grief. Look at Jesus’ teaching about reversal of expectations. Those who are rich are not blessed? Those who have plenty will be hungry? Those laughing will weep? Those who are liked and are spoken well of will face rejection? What does this tell us about God? What does this tell us about the kingdom of heaven? What is Jesus teaching? In a broad sense, Jesus is reversing the expectations of the world and giving new revelation for what we misunderstood in the Old Testament about blessings. Jesus is redefining the way the world has decided the kingdom of God works. We may struggle to understand how the poor can be called blessed and the rich be warned of woes to come. That seems counter to what we experience in our lives. Yet, Jesus is commenting on the way of the world, both in the first century and today.

During the 18th century, as John Wesley brought revival to the Church of England and people turned from their sinful behaviors, they became more affluent, and John worried that their affluence would turn them from the Gospel. Wealth today is often seen by Christians as the result of God's blessings, especially among those who follow a prosperity interpretation of the Gospel. This is an interpretation of the Gospel where belief in Jesus brings material riches in this life and complete restoration in heaven. Those who teach a prosperity version of the Gospel find great difficulty supporting their ideas from this teaching of Jesus. We do receive blessings in this life as we follow Jesus, as we seek to grow into the image of Christ and engage fully into our call to serve others while we are alive, but what Jesus teaches is not consistent with the world's understanding or desire for blessings.

Let's examine these blessing and woe statements from Jesus more closely. Notice the tense in the first and the fourth blessings and woes is present tense. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." The actions described in these blessings and woes occur now, not in the future. Also, notice that God is not mentioned as acting, but in Jesus' teaching, God is the implied agent to bring both blessings and woes. We need to keep in mind that in Luke's Gospel, this teaching follows Jesus' healing of those who were not socially acceptable, lepers and a paralytic as example, and recall that Jesus has called a tax collector, a sinner, to be a disciple. Jesus' actions are bringing blessings to the poor. Jesus is redefining the idea of God's concern for the poor. They do not remain those on the margins. They are those in the kingdom of God.

We also need to understand that in Luke's Gospel, the poor include those who have economic challenges and those who are marginalized in the world. It is a broader concept of who is poor. Likewise, Luke's concept of who is rich is broader. The rich are those with significant resources who fail to consider others' needs and may harm them or take advantage of them by their actions. The rich are not those who have wealth, but are those who are misusing their power and privilege, those who are considered insiders by the world, those who are arrogant and consider themselves secure apart from God. Those who meet Luke's definition of the rich face the woe of no future compensation.

The second and third blessings and woes are in the future tense: those who are hungry will be filled, those who weep will laugh. These are future actions that describe the coming kingdom of God, a kingdom that will not have hunger or poverty. Those who are full now will

hunger and those who laugh now will weep. The arrival of the kingdom of God will catch those who hold to the world's idea of blessings and are following false values. Unaware that their situation will be reversed, they will be empty, and they will weep at their new situation.

Next, notice the last of the blessings and woes are also connected. The message found in this pairing is that God's people, past, present and future, may expect rejection and hatred from the world. Jesus has been healing lepers, those set aside from the rest of society. Jesus has been including tax collectors, sinners, as his disciples, those who cannot be part of the world's view of the kingdom of God. These who are rejected by the world receive the healing touch and restoration from Jesus and are included in the kingdom of God. This teaching will bring, and does bring, division to those in the world who cling to and benefit from the old-world order. God's people in the past, present, and future are to expect and will experience hatred and rejection. These are not words we would use on our sign to invite people into the church, "Come and joyfully experience the hatred and rejection of the world." Yet we see this response of the world in Israel's history, in our own history, and growing today across the globe as Christians are persecuted, martyred, and once strongholds of religious freedoms are enacting new laws, such as in Canada, laws declaring those who teach Biblical principles are using hate speech and must be silent or face jail time. We in the United States need to face the reality of this possibility coming to our nation, a nation founded on trust in God. Jesus demonstrated rejection by the world as he taught, lived, and died; we as Jesus' followers are promised nothing less. The world only speaks well of those who follow its standards. Those who speak truth to those in the world have not, do not, and will not ever fare well, but will face rejection and hatred. Yet when we experience rejection from the world, we are to rejoice. Jesus' reference to the false prophets in his teaching makes this point. The false prophets' message to Israel was consistent with the world's understanding and direction. Jesus stands in opposition to such an idea. Jesus is not seeking a popular response. Jesus is speaking truth. We as Jesus' followers, his body in this place, also must speak truth and be prepared to rejoice as the world responds.

We have witnessed Jesus teaching reversal here on the plain, and in response, we should ask ourselves, "What is our response to this teaching?" We could ask ourselves many questions such as, "Are we poor or rich? Do we rely on God? Do we care for the poor in our community, both the economic poor and the poor who are without God? What is our response to those in our community who have needs? Do we see them? Do we visit them? Do they come to our doors for

help? Do our efforts to help lift them out of their desperate situations or do we act so as to enable them to stay? Do our efforts allow Jesus to transform their lives?" These are difficult questions, yet our ministry to those on this mission field must reflect the compassion that Jesus shows to Jews, Gentiles, and those outside of the boundaries of society. Our efforts for ministry must start with compassion. Jesus does, as seen here on the plain, teach reversal, and Jesus also demonstrates reversal. Jesus, Lord of all, humbles himself and dies on the cross, becoming cursed for us, yet through reversal, Jesus brings us into a right relationship with God. Jesus reverses the control of sin over us and brings us from death to life. We need to realize that if we love others as Jesus loves us, we are at risk of being misunderstood by the world. Yet, as Christians, we do not look to the world for acceptance, but to the Father. Our rejection by the world is not a matter for our concern. We live in and for the acceptance of the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

If we are to be Good News to the poor, we have to become willing to step out of our comfortable places of past blessedness and enter into the risky places where the poor are clinging to life and seek to be actual blessings to them. John Wesley insisted that Methodists visit the poor. Wesley would not let the Methodists send the poor blessings of monetary gifts, but insisted they go and visit them, listen to them, get to know them, and let their situations speak more clearly to their hearts, hearts that were changed by those visits from hearts of stone to hearts that overflowed with the profound love of God for the poor. The early Methodists were known for this reach into their communities. My experience is that we have lost much if not all of this knowledge of how to go and be with the poor and to actually bring and be Good News to them. We need to have our eyes opened. We are the blind, hoping that the poor will come to us. Let us start with deep prayer and ask God to send the Holy Spirit to guide our feet so that we who are poor in love might find reversal through Christ and be filled with the abundance of Jesus' overflowing love, a love that is then poured out through us into the needs of those in this place.

Pray with me: Lord, come and reverse our lives so that we may be your humble servants, depending fully on you, and receive sight to see the poor and courage to go to them and bring your blessings to them so that they too may be those who are found in the kingdom of God, filled, laughing, and spoken well of by all. Come, Holy Spirit, and guide our steps into Jesus' mission to the poor, hungry, weeping, and hated so that you may bless them. Amen.