

Sermon February 17, 2019 Luke Sermon on the Plain: JEREMIAH 17:5-10; PSALM 1; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-20; LUKE 6:17-26
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I don't know about you, but I like it best when everything goes well in my life: when things go smoothly at work and there's not too much stress, when people get along and everyone does their job, when I have time and energy to get everything done, when things are good at home, when we have fun and nobody's sick or upset, when I feel *loved* by my family and friends and colleagues, when I eat well and exercise properly, when we keep on top of the finances so there's enough money to do what we want to do, when I have time to see friends and enjoy life, when I can get out outside in nature, paddle and sail, and play music occasionally. You'll have your own list like this I'm thinking but I guess generally everyone likes it best when things *go* well. Would you say that? I think most people would. Kind of a no brainer.

I guess I tend to think that those good times are when God is with me. I just want those good times to continue indefinitely so I'm pretty much ready to do whatever God wants so we can keep on letting the good times roll! I often feel *full* at those times – full of gratitude, rich in blessing, full of laughter, full of joy! I thank God for *making* things so good, for blessing me, for walking with me,

and for all His goodness to me and my loved ones. Probably *most* people would think that those good times are a sign we are blessed by God and God is with us. Wouldn't you say so? I think I would.

When times are good like that and things are going well it's great to come to church and read in the gospels how loving God and being regular in church will make everything go well for us.

Like this morning, for example, when we read from Luke where Jesus says:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Ok wait, that isn't quite what I meant but there's always the next verse:

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Um. Ok. Well how about the next:

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Well. That one wasn't too bad. Maybe the next will be even better.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude
you,
revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Um. Ok. Well. I hadn't really been thinking that being hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed could be signs of God's blessing. Were you? No I didn't think so. But apparently Jesus *does* think that. *He* says: "Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."

Jesus *does* think that all these tough things that you and I generally avoid are places to look for God's blessing. I can't really imagine it being said with greater bluntness than in these three verses we just looked at and you know what? Those three are the *blessings!* In the three verses *after that* He gives us the woes:

²⁴ 'But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ 'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

'Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

I have to admit that I never really thought of these things as woes before I read this. Being well off, well fed, and full of laughter are things that most of us aspire to on a daily basis I'm thinking – as hard as we can pretty much.

If that is true of most of us then what is Jesus on about? As is often the case, it's worth widening our focus a bit to look at the context in which Jesus is preaching this 'Sermon on the Plain' and to whom He is preaching it.

If we back up a bit we can look at Jesus has been doing in chapter five. He calls His first disciples. He lays hands on a leper and heals him. He forgives the sins of a person suffering from paralysis. Not everyone is happy about these things. A group of Pharisees begin to ask what right He has to be forgiving sins. The fateful charge of blasphemy begins to swirl around Him.

Associating with lepers and paralytics is bad enough, but when He then calls Levi, a tax collector to follow Him, He begins, in the eyes of the Pharisees to be damned by association. They begin to question everything about Him. When the disciples are seen on the sabbath plucking grain to feed themselves and Jesus then heals a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the sabbath the picture is complete. Jesus clearly is one who breaks

the law by healing on the Sabbath. He associates with the unclean, He's probably unclean Himself. And that is the essence of His Sermon On The Plain.

The gospel makes it clear that Jesus is preaching the Sermon On The Plain to the *disciples*. That may include *us*. Although it bears a close resemblance, it's not the Sermon On The Mount. He's come down from the lofty places and stood on the plain, perhaps intending to speak of what is *ordinary*, usual, realistic. He wants them to know that it will not be possible to walk with Him without suffering. To associate with Jesus himself is to risk being seen as unclean – or at least uncool, which is probably the same thing.

When we dissociate ourselves from all our bad experiences we stay clean in our own eyes and those around us, untouched by the stains of poverty, hunger, neediness, and grief. But that sanitized picture is a false self. A theologian might call that a 'theology of glory' – the belief that we somehow we are above suffering.

But there's so much more to us than that. All our compassion, all our generosity, all our capacity for healing, forgiveness, and faith – all that makes us followers of Jesus - is founded *not* in the

squeaky clean invincibility of glory, but in the cross. We discovered these deeper qualities in the terrors that have beset *us* at times. We've been ill. We've been rejected. We've been hungry, or known addiction. We've lived with gnawing emptiness through decades. We've walked with loved ones through terrible pain and hardship. In their dying we've experienced a grief and a loss so deep we were afraid we might not be *able* to process it.

I don't want to dwell on them, but I also don't want to dress these painful experiences up. I don't want to say that they are somehow secretly good because through them we learn and grow. I don't think that's appreciated by those who are truly suffering and I don't think that's what Jesus is saying in the sermon on the plain. In my experience the effort to whitewash it only makes it harder. These hurtful things hurt, and they hurt every one of us at some point – rich or poor, hungry or full. They hurt so much I wish I did not have to say it. It sometimes takes years before we're able fully to release the pain they cause. But there is no denying that these experiences are also the birthplace of all our compassion, our capacity to share in the suffering of others. It's the birthplace of all that makes us Christ-like at times.

It's why, for example, we brought gloves and socks and blankets to church this morning for homeless neighbours. It's why one of us stood outside for an hour in the snow on Wednesday morning waiting for an ambulance with Roland who had spent the night outside in that doorway over there. We do it because we have glimpsed for ourselves – in whatever small way – the pain and fear of homelessness and the serious danger of freezing to death in snowy wet weather. We also remember how *much* of God's blessing came to us in times of woe.

It's not that Jesus expects His disciples to stay in the place of suffering. He calls us *forward*, to resurrection and new life. His beatitudes both here and in Matthew present a picture of both blessing and woe. We're *always* going to love the good times best. But without *both* blessing *and* woe, we would not know compassion, we would not know Christ, and in truth we would not know ourselves.