

**Sermon, 11 February 2007—Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; First Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Those of you who have been reviewing the Gospel according to Saint Luke on Tuesday evenings will quickly recognize the words of Jesus that we have heard today. Luke and Matthew both show Jesus, in the early days of his ministry, preaching to a crowd. In Matthew's case, the sermon is given on a mountain, just as the earlier Law was given on Sinai. In Luke's case, the sermon is given on a level place. The parallel with Sinai is not lost, though. Luke has just shown us Jesus up on a mountain, spending an entire night at prayer; when morning comes, he calls his followers and picks twelve of them to be his disciples, and then he comes down from the mountain, down to this open plain, and begins to preach as we heard today. Those who need to hear these words, as was the case with Moses and the people of Israel, are not up on the mountain, but in the valley, where all of us spend our lives.

We are more familiar with the spiritualized version of these words that Matthew offers: those who are blessed are not simply the deprived or the starving—it is hard to accept that these physical conditions are prerequisites for bliss—instead, as Matthew has it, blessing arises when we are poor in spirit or when we are hungry to be righteous. Luke, though, neither softens nor amplifies nor transcends. He forces us to consider the bare economic and emotional and physical fact.

He is right. We must start here. So, in this Gospel, Jesus rightly starts at the lower levels of human need, speaking of hunger and grief, which we all recognize and fear and share at various moments in our life—and just in case we no longer recall poverty or hunger or sorrow, Jesus mentions wealth and fullness and laughter. Everyone can identify one of these as theirs.

Jesus is saying, in other words, that his message is for everyone. He is also saying that we start our journey with him, as his disciples, at the most basic level. If we cannot identify where we are, we will never know where to go. One of the states Jesus mentions is mine today, and if I do not know which one it is, then that is my first task. I must start where I am, so that I can come to understand my condition and its consequences and its potential. If I weep, I will be comforted; if I laugh, I will weep soon enough.

Of course, Jesus points out the blessedness of those deprived and the woefulness of those surfeited. In the way of the world, this is nonsense. But it is essential to Luke's understanding of the Good News: Mary herself, in this Gospel, carols that God fills the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty, just as God casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. Luke makes this point more ominously in certain parables of reversal, particularly in the shortsightedness of relying on wealth; and he echoes it in his selections from the sayings of Jesus. The first will be last, and the last will be first.

One way to stand in contempt of God's Word is to convert these descriptions into categories of people. The persistence of this particularly religious temptation is astonishing. Nietzsche, the bitter philosopher, despised Christianity for this: the veiled competitiveness of the meek, the covert abusiveness of the humble, the lethal destructiveness of the loving, and their smug condemnation of anything less meek or humble or loving than they. This is still our gleeful sin in this day of identity politics: if I can certify the ways I have been deprived, I can demand compensation—but only if I can somehow retain my membership in the category of the diminished and victimized. And part of the grim satisfaction of this is the consolation that those unlike myself, those at the surfeit end of the spectrum,

will roast in Hell, eternally and categorically wrong because of what they are. This is certainly not what Jesus is talking about.

The other way of standing in contempt of God's Word is to convert these descriptions into a formula of exchange. The persistence of that particularly religious temptation is also astonishing. God's finger is in each individual's pie, meddling, overturning, fixing or frustrating, teaching, punishing, rewarding. However, those who have lived with this theology know it is a humiliating and baffling take on the world, producing resentment rather than encouragement. It reduces human beings to puppets and God to a scorekeeper, so that we are both manipulated and responsible. God becomes the umpire that also plays ball, and the game is to figure out what the game is on a slippery field at night. That is certainly not what Jesus is talking about either.

What we are presented with here is a brief, but comprehensive, view of the human condition. Jesus' pairing of bliss and woe points to the fluid totality of our circumstances as human beings. We pass through all of them, and wherever we find ourselves, Jesus is recommending that we experience the present as knowledge of the future. The blessedness and woefulness of the present lies in our anticipation of what is yet to come. I am blessed in grief because it will pass. I am woeful in fullness because it will not last. This blessedness is not giddy denial any more than the woefulness is gloomy anxiety. The truth in the totality of Jesus' words is that bliss and woe turn one into the other. Even more, they are grasped as the fundamental and mysterious pattern of divine intervention in human life: God comforts the troubled and troubles the comfortable. We are never singly and solely only one of these, but weep and laugh all our life long.

The conventional wisdom of the Middle Ages, taught with either glee or horror, was the inexorable and pervasive turning of Fortune's Wheel. For them, it was the hidden mechanism of the world. Dante depicts Fortuna as blissful and deaf, obedient to God, as she raises and lowers us all, bound hand and foot to her wheel. Wherever you are on her wheel, you are in her power, and she is indifferent to your placement; whether you rejoice or lament, she is impervious to your voice. But we are all there, and the turning of this wheel Dante considered as natural as the rotation of the stars, and because of that, he saw it as divinely ordained and good.

We have turned all this into a game show. But in two ways, this rising and falling is a deep vision. First, it acknowledges that wherever you are on the wheel, you are part of a spiritual exchange. Spirituality is not the last refinement of the affluently bored; it is your hope at the lowest turn of the wheel. There is no curve of the wheel outside the reach of God's hands, no turn of it not empowered by what causes planets to orbit suns and spin on their axes. Second, the spirituality we encounter on the wheel is one of fluidity and detachment. Nothing is permanent, and suffering arises from the delusion that we can hold on to what is in our hands. We cannot; it passes through our hands only for a moment. This does not have to be a pessimistic take on life; instead it can free us into seeking consolation from more lasting sources.

This teaching is built into Jesus' words. Our blessedness and woefulness arise from the impermanence of our condition. The blessedness of desolation is the comfort that waits in the future. The woefulness of consolation is the deprivation that waits in the future. To know these things is to understand the sovereignty of God. To embrace these things—to give thanks during times of loss, to give away what one has during times of

plenty—is to undergo a spiritual discipline that scoops all the dregs that clog and stick to the bottom of the deep wide bowl of our heart until we reach the stone surface of our creatureliness, hard and irreducible and impenetrable. To go through this purging and scouring voluntarily, that is, to give away everything one has and to follow Christ in utter freedom, is terrifying and crazy if there is no God. “Freedom’s just another word for nothing-left-to-lose;” yes, but that means you cannot lose what is left. The undesirable and unappealing bliss of the poor is to know they have no one but God; the kingdom of God belongs to those who have nothing else, not as a reward, but because the gift of God truly cannot be taken away from anyone. Put that way, we think we might not want this bliss after all.

But you cannot turn your back on it; that is the meaning of the woes. You will go down to the dust, and even there, as the Psalmist says, you will bow down to God in worship. As much as we try to stave off and soften that moment through wealth and laughter and sensual delights, that pursuit of distractions only intensifies our attachment to what is impermanent and therefore increases our howling withdrawal when, strapped to the bed, cold turkey, what we have come to depend on is removed, ounce by ounce, second by second, breath by breath.

Luke hints at the only thing that makes all this tolerable. All these categories—the poor or wealthy, the hungry or satiated, the weeping or laughing—all these are such a round of circumstance that we might come to think of them as meaningless, even nauseating in their repetitiveness, except when we undergo them for Jesus’ sake. When we are treated by anyone as a category, not as a person, and despised, then we are told that we are blessed if we find ourselves there because of what we have done on Jesus’ behalf. Certainly if we weep for Jesus’ sake, or go hungry because we are tending

his own, but even if we laugh for Jesus' sake, and share in a banquet because it is his table, then we are blessed. We are blessed in what we do in his name, because then we have become true disciples of the one who, possessing all things, made himself poor for our sake, the one who feasted with sinners and had no place to lay his head, the one who humbled himself even to the cross and was then exalted to sit at God's right hand. We are blessed because we have become like him, and if we have become like him, then we can hope to know him as he is, and to live with him through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the glory of the one God, whom we praise this day.