

Luke 6:17-26 Blessed are the Poor/ Woe to you who are Rich

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St. Mary the Virgin

Luke 6:17-26:¹⁷ Jesus came down from the mountain with them and stood on a large area of level ground. A great company of his disciples and a huge crowd of people from all around Judea and Jerusalem and the area around Tyre and Sidon joined him there. ¹⁸ They came to hear him and to be healed from their diseases, and those bothered by unclean spirits were healed. ¹⁹ The whole crowd wanted to touch him, because power was going out from him and he was healing everyone. ²⁰ Jesus raised his eyes to his disciples and said: "Happy are you who are poor, because God's kingdom is yours. ²¹ Happy are you who hunger now, because you will be satisfied. Happy are you who weep now, because you will laugh ²² Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you, and condemn your name as evil because of the Human One. ²³ Rejoice when that happens! Leap for joy because you have a great reward in heaven. Their ancestors did the same things to the prophets. ²⁴ But how terrible for you who are rich, because you have already received your comfort. ²⁵ How terrible for you who have plenty now, because you will be hungry. How terrible for you who laugh now, because you will mourn and weep. ²⁶ How terrible for you when all speak well of you. Their ancestors did the same things to the false prophets. (Common English Bible)

I first preached on this text when I was assisting at All Saints in Princeton, and while the text in front of me was Luke I decided to preach off of Matthew and talked for the entire sermon about what it means to be poor in spirit.

This was in the 70s when churches were still full. After the Family Service I would lead a group of about 40 in adult ed and the Rector would lead a larger group on a different topic. For a variety of reasons, I was doing all of the preaching at the Family Service and we were in a period in which my adult ed group reacted to my sermon. So after the Eucharist I went to the meeting room and about 40 men and women told me what they thought of my sermon. They were mostly polite. People are usually polite to the preacher. But a Princeton professor spoke up and said that I had failed. The text was from Luke, not Matthew, the sermon on the Plain not the Mount and the word was poor not poor in spirit. How dare I let a community as wealthy as Princeton off the hook by preaching on spiritual impoverishment? He made such an impression upon me that I have mostly avoided this text and I'm only touching it now because in recent years I've made it the practice to only preach on the Gospel reading.

So, I'm very reluctant to preach to you about something that I absolutely believe and something that was crucial to my career choice providing housing to people who are homeless, but also something that I know can easily offend. As I worked on the sermon a quote about what the church exists for sprang to mind and I Googled it to be certain that I had the citation correct. I have always ascribed the quote that the church exists to

comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable to the late Bishop Henry Hobson of Southern Ohio but I discovered that he was quoting the 19th century journalist Finley Peter Dunne—about whom I know nothing—who was describing the role of a newspaper. This morning's gospel is a text to afflict the comfortable. What does it mean?

Sometimes the 1st word, Μακάριοι¹/makarioi is translated Happy. It is a technical term describing the feeling the High Priest had when he stood in the Holy of Holies, that is, in the presence of God. For those of us my age or older the word is familiar to us as the name Markarios, the name of the former Archbishop of Cyprus and president of the Greek Republic of Cyprus, Abp Makarios. The word for poor, πτωχοί/ptōchoi simply means poor, impoverished, without resources. In other words the common word for poor. We could paraphrase the passage to say that the poor are in God's presence because they are poor and therefore the kingdom of God is theirs. Where does that leave you and me?

I have sometimes said that the bible is only good news if you're poor. The bible is good news for those who know that they are absolutely dependent upon God. In the bible, the only people who are absolutely dependent upon God are the poor. All of the rest of us may worship God but we also care about other forms of security. The bible is radical. It says that we are not to rely on any form of security other than God.

I've been a priest for more than 45 years. I worked with the homeless for slightly more than 22 years until I retired in 2010. I am not poor. I live in Westport and have lived there for decades. I have great faith in God but I don't count on God to carry me through retirement. I count on the Church Pension Fund to do that. I can't imagine what my life would be like were I to rely on God entirely? Perhaps it would be more blessed or happy as this text says? It would certainly be easier to relate to this text if the woes weren't included. They drive home the point of absolute preference for poverty.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry².

The word consolation in the first woe, v. 24, παράκλησις/paraklēsin means literally *summons*, or *calling near*. I would argue that it contrasts to the condition of the poor. They are in the presence of God, which unfortunately for us, means that they do not have the consolations of this age. The wealthy have all of the advantages they will ever have and in the kingdom they will be without consolation. Not good news for you and me. It makes me uncomfortable and the temptation is to explain it away so I looked further into Luke.

If we read on in the text to next Sunday's Gospel, the 7th Sunday after the Epiphany: 6:32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High."

It would appear that perhaps we too can be Μακάριοι happy or blessed, in the presence of God, if we exercise selfless hospitality. The Gospel says that there is no value in being hospitable to those who are like us because even sinners do that. We are called

¹ It's a plural

² I'm listening to Iris Dement as I write this. She was raised Christian, and it seems to have taken.

to a different form of hospitality if we are to enjoy the vision of the Holy of Holies and be blessed as the poor are blessed.

I have to be careful here because I don't want to take the radical statement of Blessed are the poor contrasted with Woe to you who are rich and water it down by saying that all we need to do is be nice to the poor. It is a radical call for us to be dependent upon God in everything. But I do want to say that there is some hope for the rest of us if we practice radical hospitality. This is another way of saying that Christianity calls on us to live as if we actually believe what we say. If our future is secure, if we know that we will be saved and not condemned to Hell, then we have nothing to worry about and we should be able to be radically generous. Of course this assumes that we even worry about our salvation. Many of us don't. Nor do many of us worry about creating the kingdom in this life. So the assumption is that you and I both worry about salvation and feel urgency to establish the kingdom in this life. The call is for us to give of ourselves without thought so that we eradicate poverty, so that we can be certain that no one is hungry, and to live in a world in which no one is sick.

I don't believe that Jesus means that the poor are blessed so that everyone should be poor. He does mean that there are, for instance, two ways to be rich. As Greenpeace used to say, one way to be rich is to have a lot of money; the other is to have few needs. We live in an absolutely consumer driven world in which all of us must have more rather than a world that recognizes wealth as having few needs.

Traditionally the church has said that this is a burden too great for normal people to bear so Monks and Nuns took vows of poverty but the rest of us did not. It was considered to be an extra and optional part of Christianity. Luke doesn't know this. Luke says that if we are to be part of the Kingdom of God then we have to work now in this life with the poor.

That means that we end the debate over insuring the poor. We insure them. That means that we end the debate over who deserves housing. We house everyone. That means that we end the debate over who gets educated. We educate everyone. It means many other things you would expect me to say and it means that solving these problems takes precedence over arguments about what we can and can't afford.

Of course we don't live in a Christian world. The church can't simply say that we must insure the uninsured for instance and have it happen. The tragedy is that we are so certain this message will fall on deaf ears that we don't pay attention to it. Of course the church has position papers on insuring everyone, but who pays attention to them?

Being Christian is risky business. I never get it right. But whatever else Christianity is about it is about caring for the poor. They are the ones who stand in the presence of God, they are blessed, and the kingdom of God is theirs. The opportunity we have before us is to take that statement from today's Gospel and examine how true the ways we live our lives are to this defining theme in Luke. Can we afford to do otherwise and still be Christian? As I say from time-to-time, it's much easier to be an Episcopalian than a Christian. It's Woe to Us unless we make being with the Blessed our priority.