

Sermon 17 February 2019  
Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

This morning's gospel is sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain in contrast to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. In Luke Jesus comes down from the mountain to teach—and his teaching disturbs the multitude. He frames his message in the words of a prophet—the contrast between blessings and woes—between hope and dread.

*Blessed are you when you are poor. Woe to you who are rich.* The words are a complete reversal of popular wisdom. Aren't the rich wealthy *because* God has blessed them?

It is possible, even likely, that no one in the crowd understood what he was talking about. A poor man in the crowd would be justified to think, *"When and how does the kingdom of God belong to me?"* A rich woman in the crowd would be justified to think, *"Why do you pronounce a woe on me just because I am wealthy?"* The teaching is disturbing, a shocking reversal of popular opinion—and it is entirely consistent with what Jesus taught throughout his days as a wandering rabbi.

We still wonder what to do with stories like these. We can speak about them in the abstract. We can talk about the responsibility of the wealthy to use their riches for the good of all. We see the difference in the wealthy who hoard and the wealthy who use their wealth for good.

We can talk about a simplicity of poverty that causes the poor to look to God and draws them into a place of divine love—a place where they realize true happiness is found in the company of God and not in the accumulation of things. Because the poor have few worldly things to rely on, they are closer to the profound blessedness that comes when we lay aside the pursuit of worldly illusions and put our trust in God. (Such thinking has done terrible things to the poor in history; preachers have preached sermons to encourage the poor to accept injustice as God's good plan for their souls.)

We can talk about such things and understand there is truth there—but in the push and shove of the world we live in, there is absurdity there. Not many of us are willing to give up the woe of our wealth for the blessings of poverty.

Jesus knows what he is doing. He is turning the world upside down. He is shaking things up, messing with our minds. He challenges us to see the world in a new way, to recognize new depths and new shapes of reality. He challenges us to *sign on* for a revolution. Jesus calls his listeners to open themselves to a new life—a life where they allow their strongest assumptions and favorite attitudes to be questioned.

One of the worst things I could do this morning is try to explain the full meaning and impact of this passage of blessings and woes. That is probably one of the reasons you come to church on Sunday, for the preacher to explain what the stories of the Bible mean. That is an understandable reason for coming, and you are justified in expecting Molly and me to help us all make sense of what we read. But sometimes our explanations get in the way of our growth, they blunt the necessary disturbance of the scripture; our explanations falsely assure us we understand what we have read, and help us move on too soon before God is finished with us. Sometimes we need to live in the uncertainty, discomfort, and confusion Jesus creates.

Read the remainder of the sixth chapter of Luke to see how Jesus begins to spell out some of the consequences of his sermon on the plain. *Love your enemies. Forgive. Take the log out of your own eye so you can see clearly how to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. Judge not that you be not judged.* It is not that the people had not heard these teachings before; Jesus simply jolts these truths from the shadows of their minds into the bright light of the choices he demands they make every day.

\* \* \*

It might help us to make sense of what Jesus is saying here if we understand that when he draws clear distinctions between right and wrong, between blessings and woes, Jesus always does so under the umbrella of the Father's relentless, unwavering, steadfast love. Jesus does nothing outside the compass of God's love. All his teaching, all his life, his death and his resurrection, and all the work of the Holy Spirit through the centuries have been for this single purpose—that we learn *to love God with everything we have and everything we are, and to love*

*our neighbors as we love ourselves.* In the place created by love, we become increasingly aware of being in God's presence, increasingly aware of being led by the Holy Spirit. Until the box of old, used-up ways of thinking is broken open, we live in confinement, a place too tight and too limited to hold the brilliance of the world we were created for. Until we break out, our world is too small—our God is too small.

\* \* \*

In Genesis we read that Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden when they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At first it seems strange that God would want to deny humanity the gift of knowing good from evil, but one strain of tradition suggests that we simply were not ready to handle that knowledge. Prayerful writers have speculated that God was reserving that fruit for a time when we were more mature and skilled in discernment. The Creator would, in time, at the right time, give us the knowledge of good and evil, but we had some growing up to do. It is a brilliant insight, I think—an insight that might explain a lot about what is messed up in the world.

God judged that we were not ready to have the gift of the knowledge of good and evil, that we were not equipped to handle it. We had some growing up to do.

There is plenty of evidence that we still are not good at managing our judgments of good and evil. Of course, there are blatant evils and blatant goods that we recognize immediately; everyone knows child abuse is evil; everyone knows it is good to give food to a hungry person. Very few people would argue about such things. There are some things that we know are good and some things we know are evil.

The problem comes with the rest of the judgments we make. Jesus tells us bluntly, *“Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn and you will not be condemned.”* We are adept at qualifying or completely ignoring his counsel on judging. It seems God was right when he decided we were too immature to manage our judgment. Test yourself this week; try to make a note of the time you spend judging others or situations. Make a note and pause for a couple minutes

*especially* when you are certain your judgment is valid and justified. Most of us will discover we spend too much time judging. We might discover how often we leap to judgment and how often we resist hearing anything that would contradict our most firm and precious opinions.

We judge others and our judgment opens chasms and builds walls between us. God only knows how many of our judgments are shallow, ill informed, or plain wrong. We know there is a difference between right and wrong, but we handle that knowledge in childish ways. We use too much of the little bit we know about good and evil to perpetuate separation, alienation, injustice, and other forms of brokenness and evil. As we grow in understanding and wisdom we begin to realize that many or most of our judgments are woefully flawed, and too often driven by self-interest, prejudice, and fear.

*If that is true:*

*How can we stop?*

*What are we to do?*

*How can we become wise?*

\* \* \*

The prophet Micah gives us good counsel.

*And he has told you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you that you love justice, do mercy, and walk humbly with your God.*

\* \* \*

Perhaps we begin with humility. *Walk humbly with your God.* We confess our need for God's help; we cannot change our ways without God. In the light of Christ, we ask for the insights of the Holy Spirit to see more clearly where we see so poorly. It is a humble choice to confess that we might be wrong, that we might misunderstand, and that we need help in discerning the truth, in discerning the difference between good and evil. We begin there. We walk humbly with our God.

As we walk humbly with God, we are on the lookout for issues of *justice* and opportunities for *mercy*. We look to see, and when we see, we pray to understand; when we understand, we ask for the decency and courage to do something about what we see. We pray for the

fortitude to press through the forces of fear or simple inconvenience to demonstrate our love for others, our love of justice and our determination to do mercy. In all this, God is with us, we are not alone.

\* \* \*

Finally let me try to simplify some of what we can do to follow the new way of life Jesus charts for us.

***Slow down.***

We live in too big a hurry. There is no way for us to find wisdom in the pace of modern living. We will simply stay where we are, ignorant of some of the most wonderful, terrible, and beautiful things in our existence. There are two things that will slow us down—great love and great suffering (Richard Rohr). We all know that is true. Suffering will come to all of us inevitably—but we can choose to seek great love. Slow down and look for love.

***Make the time and find a place.***

We will not accidentally grow into the persons we were created to be. As I've said before, you will not *find* the time; you must *make* the time to be with God. Make the time and find a place to be still. *Be still and know that I am God.*

***Trust silence,  
and listen for the still, small voice of God in your heart—  
simply listen.***

***Read the stories of Jesus—simply read and sit with them.***

***Ask God to give you the desires of your heart.***

I close with one of the prayers I pray throughout the week.

*Oh God, you are over all, in all, beyond all.*

*Open my eyes to see the wonders that surround me;*

*open my heart to know the wonders of my*

*brothers and sisters;*

*open my lips to sing your praise.*

*Restore all people in your image and likeness.*

*In and through Christ. Amen.*