

C Lectionary 6 2.13.22

Luke 6:17-26

Focus Statement: The kingdom of God is a kingdom of justice.

The people came “from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.” These were not like the crowds that chased Jesus out of Nazareth, or the suspicious Pharisees who came to test or question. This was a gathering of those responding to a call, they have come “to hear [Jesus] and to be healed of their diseases.” This crowd came to hear and to be healed, and they were. With the “power[that] came out from him... [Jesus] healed all of them.”

As we read this passage, and wrestle with the challenges it presents, it's important to keep in mind that this was a pro-Jesus audience. They were followers of Jesus, supporters of Jesus, disciples of Jesus. When Jesus delivered this teaching, he was giving it to an insider crowd. To people like us. This wasn't a message for seekers, for the lost and the lowly; this was for those who had been found. A teaching on what to do, how to live, what it meant to be part of the kingdom.

This discipleship teaching starts in blessing, it is anchored in blessing. And a blessing targeted very specifically to those who hear it. Blessed are you, Jesus said to this gathered crowd of disciples. Before you learn anything else about what to do, how to live, how to be, know this one truth, you are blessed.

You are blessed is a good place for this to start, because I'll be real, it gets real weird after that. Then Jesus started talking about the timing of that blessing, when they would know

they were blessed. The people Jesus called blessed were, are, not the ones the world views as blessed. “Blessed are you who are poor,” Jesus said, “for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you.” Now, I don’t know about you, but poor, hungry, weeping, hated, excluded, and reviled does not to me sound like the mark of blessing. Blessing sounds like the opposite of that. But Jesus says it is, and here’s why Jesus says it is. Not for some weird glorification or idealization of what it means to be poor. This isn’t that thing where poverty is romanticized as have the freedom to focus on what quote-unquote really matters. Poverty isn’t romantic, poverty isn’t ideal, Jesus isn’t wishing poverty on anyone as a more pure way to live. This is about lifting up the truth that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of reversal. That the way things are now is not the way they will be in the kingdom of God.

And to more traditional signs of blessing? Things like wealth—or if not wealth at least enough, fullness, joy, respect? To those things, Jesus had a different message. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your reward. 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. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

I want to pause here and temper this just a little bit, because “woe” does not mean “cursed.” Woe means whoa, like watch out. Be alert, be on guard, you who are rich, who are full, who

are laughing, whom others speak well of. Your success is not a result of your own doing, it is not something you deserve, something that is owed to you.

Our sending hymn this morning is one of my favorites, the Canticle of the Turning. It's a perfect hymn for this reading, because it is an adaptation of the Magnificat, the words Mary sang before Jesus' birth that foreshadow this aspect of Jesus' teachings. "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary sang, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

The Canticle of the Turning is one of my favorite hymns, and it was also super popular in seminary, a place full of idealistic young leaders eager to go out and change the world for Jesus. With great enthusiasm, we future movers and shakers would boldly sing out about how "though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me." As we wait for the day where through the fire of God's justice, "not a stone would be left on stone" and "the spear and rod can be crushed by God who is turning the world around." I love this song, but I've always sung in differently since Bishop Satterlee made a comment in our preaching class back in seminary. He remarked, sort of off the cuff I think, but it stuck with me, "everybody loves singing this song because we think other people's towers are the ones that have to fall. But if "not a stone will be left on stone," that means our beloved towers have to fall as well."

Our towers have to fall. The poor are blessed and the full must watch out, the small do great works and the rich sent away empty, for the kingdom of God is a kingdom of reversal. This teaching, and teachings like it, are what made Jesus' message so scandalous, what eventually led to his death. Because he's telling the powerful, your power is not inherent, it is not lasting, it is not yours. And he's telling the powerless, how things are now is not how they should be, not how God intended, not how they will always be. So hard is this teaching that theologians as early as the writer of the Gospel of Matthew tried to contextualize it, make it more open, more palatable. But dear people of God, the power in this message is first in the pain of this message. For this promise of Jesus to transform us, it first has to tear us up.

Our towers must fall because those towers hold back the needs of others and opportunities for love and grace, forgiveness and community; and the kingdom of God is first and foremost a kingdom of justice. It hurts when they fall. It hurts to be wrong, it hurts to know we were hurting others. But when they fall, that is when grace pours in. I listened to a podcast several years ago about the unlikely friendship between Derek Black, the son of one of the most prominent voices in the white supremacist ideology and Matthew Stevenson, an Orthodox Jew who continually invited Black to Stevenson's weekly Shabbat dinners, until the towers of Black's views were destroyed, and he had to come to grips with the ugliness of the beliefs he was raised in. This is an extreme example, but I'm sure we all have our own examples of times we thought one way, held a belief or stereotype or even used language we did not know was hurtful, until someone had the courage to point it out to us. And when it was pointed out, if we had the grace and the courage to accept that

correction, the reward on the other side was worth the cost. We were changed for the better.

Dear people of God, these teachings of Jesus will challenge us more than they comfort us. They're meant to. As those responding to the call, who have heard and been healed, Jesus knows he can push hard on us, can push us past where we thought we could go. This is hard work, painful work, being transformed. But as those who had heard and been healed, Jesus loves us too much to leave us where we are. Blessed, in some static worldly sense of the word, is not what Jesus wants for us, for God's kingdom. Jesus wants nothing short of resurrection. Being part of the body of Christ is a continual process of dying to ourselves and rising again in Jesus. The world is turning, and so too are we. Thanks be to God. Amen.