

C Lectionary 6 2.17.19

Luke 6:17-26

Focus Statement: Jesus meets us where we're at.

Epiphany's one of those funny seasons of the church year that is dependent on how the other holidays fall. Unlike Advent, which is four weeks, Lent, five weeks, or even Easter's 50 days, plus a Sunday, Epiphany begins on the sixth of January and lasts until whenever Lent starts. Which means sometimes we get four weeks of Epiphany and sometimes, like this year when Easter is just about as late as it can be, we get seven. I share this to let you know we're in for a treat this morning, because I didn't confirm this, but per the sermon podcast I listen to, the last time Epiphany 6C was celebrated was during the Reagan administration. So dig in friends, because you won't get to hear these stories read in this context again for a while. Again the question we've been asking all Epiphany, what is epiphanic, what being revealed to us about the nature of Jesus, the nature of God, in the sermon on the plain.

First off, a little setting of the scene. Last week, we heard about how Jesus called the first disciples and told them from now on they were to fish for people. If we read immediately before this morning's text, verses twelve to sixteen, we would have found Jesus up on a mountain where he focused that group of early disciples to the Twelve. Disciples in Greek is *mathetes*, which is also where the word math comes from. Math in Greek is the mental effort of thinking through something. So to be a disciple in Greek, literally means to be a learner, to be someone who is thinking, is being instructed, is being shaped by a teacher. But Jesus called them something else as well. The text we didn't read this morning says that in addition to disciples he "also named [them] apostles." Apostles from the Greek

*apostolos* meaning a messenger or one who is sent to spread the news. This ragtag bunch of fishermen, tax collectors, a zealot, and a traitor are a long ways away from being apostles, but already way back in the beginning of Luke, we see that Jesus has big plans for them, for who they are, who they will become, and what they are capable of accomplishing in his name.

But that's in the future. Right now, our reading this morning has Jesus bringing his newly minted baby disciples / future apostles down from the mountain and onto a level plain. And let's talk a minute about this level plain. Because for Luke, the geographical is always theological. Remember, Luke wasn't from Judea, he didn't actually really know the area. So when Luke describes geography, he's telling us more about Jesus' theological location in the Kingdom of God than he is about Jesus' physical location as a body on the planet. And for Luke, the act of Jesus bringing his disciples down from the mountain to a level plain to meet with a great crowd of people, that's revelatory, that's telling us something about the kind of a God that God is. God is not the sort of God who sits on a throne in the heavens ruling over God's people. Rather God comes to us, comes to where we are, to where we're at, to be with us, to be in relationship with us. This leveling of the social order is an on-going theme in Luke's Gospel, we heard it in Mary's song before Jesus' birth, how "he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;" and in John the Baptist's preaching before Jesus baptism about how "every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and ALL FLESH shall see the salvation of God." That's what's happening here, that's what Jesus is literally bringing into being. By coming down off the mountain

with his disciples, by descending to the level plain where this great crowd is gathered, Jesus is demonstrating the nature of God's kingdom, a reign not from on high, but from within, among, in relationship with, God's people.

And what a collection of God's people had gathered on that plain. "A great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon." And they had come to learn from Jesus, yes, but that wasn't the only reason they were gathered. They were also there "to be healed of their diseases;" and to be cured of unclean spirits. And Jesus looked at this motley crew of need, and then at his freshly chosen disciples, who have to be feeling pretty good about themselves right now, having just been selected as part of the elite group of Twelve, and he said to those disciples, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry... Blessed are you who weep... Blessed are you when people hate you..." And this is not Matthew's spiritualized "blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger for righteousness." Luke's beatitudes are much more physical, "blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry."

What we see Jesus laying down here is what will become a predominant theme throughout the rest of the Gospel, Jesus' commitment to those in need. Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," and then he went out to the poor and pronounced God's kingdom. He said, "blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled," and he fed people. He said, "blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh," and he healed, comforted, challenged, and cajoled people into a new way of being. All too often this passage is used to glorify or idealize poverty as a way to set us free from having to deal with it. But Jesus is neither idealizing nor glorifying, what Jesus is doing is overturning

every conventional expectation of what it meant to have God's favor, what it meant to be blessed. In the first century, and, if we're honest with ourselves, also today, people of faith tended to have a very transactional relationship with God. Wealth, power, good health, good fortune, were all considered to be gifts from God as a reward for a person's faithfulness. If you think this isn't still true today, Google hashtag blessed. Trust me, what you'll find will not look like these beatitudes.

And on the flip side, things like poverty, illness, hunger, isolation, these things were seen as punishment for some failing on the part of the person. Who sinned, said the crowd to Jesus about the man born blind, this man or his parents, that such an affliction would fall on him. And what Jesus says here, and practices throughout his ministry is the reverse of that. Neither your wealth nor your poverty are from God, they are both of them signs of a broken world, a world different from the one God wants for us, a world where God meets us, where we meet each other, on the level plain of mutual indwelling relationship. And so if you are poor, if you are hungry, if you are outcast, or hurt, or alone, the promised Jesus makes in this passage is that he is with you. He is for you. And not just that, but the kingdom of God is about the reversal of your life circumstance, it is about bringing you to a place of fullness and fulfillment. In the next life, yes, but also in this one. That was the work of Jesus' ministry, and the work he passed on to the church after he ascended into heaven. That's our work, dear people of God.

And then we have the woes. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 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.” This does not sound like good news. It is, but it’s the law part of law and gospel, and law part is never the warm and fuzzy part, it’s always the part that’s hard.

But it is good news, because what it is is Jesus loving us enough to give us this warning. Because when things are going well, it’s super easy to think, wow, look how great I’m doing, and lose track of all of the things that happened to get us there. And when we get cocky, when we get arrogant, when we start to think we deserve all these good things that have happened in our lives, that’s when we can get hurt. That’s basically the story of all the prophets. Israel is flourishing and can’t see all the people they stepped on to get there, all of the cracks that are developing around them, so God sends a prophet to be like, hey guys, you need to fix all this inequality and get your community together, because the Assyrians or the Babylonians or the Philistines or whoever, are knocking at your door, and it’s really not going to end well for you.

This is a sort of a poor analogy, but the best one I can come up with is the woes are sort of like one of those Danger Falling Rocks signs. The point isn’t someone is throwing rocks at you, the point is watch out, be alert, be on guard, because as beautiful as the scenery is, there is danger in it, and it is when things are going well, more than when things are going poorly, that our faith and reliance on God is really tested. If the blessings are about God bringing the needy up from the valleys and onto the plain of mutual indwelling relationship, the woes are the opposite. They are about bringing us out of ourselves when we think things are great and we don’t really need God, about coaxing us down off the

mountaintops of our own egos and back to that same level plain where true blessings lie, blessings not of wealth or power, but of love, respect, and mutuality.

The best good news of all that I read in this text, dear people of God, is that wherever you find yourself, on the highest peak or in the lowest valley, Jesus is there too. But Jesus is not there just to hang out with you. Jesus is there to move you to a new location, to bring you up if you need raising, and to bring you down if you need lowering. Wherever you are, and whatever you need, that is the place where Christ is. Thanks be to God. Amen.