

“A Mixed-Up, Crazy, Upside-Down World”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor

First United Methodist Church

February 17, 2019

Luke 6:17-26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
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 on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But 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.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

God loves us. Loves us beyond anything we can imagine. We'd better start from this because the Jesus speaks in today's lesson are not easy to hear. We like it when we can connect with his words in a good way. But unless you've been homeless – like Pam Anderson who organizes the Point in Time count of homeless persons in Wausau – unless your cupboards have really been bare – like old Mother Hubbard, in the nursery rhyme – then he's not speaking a blessing on you. Or me. But if you are well fed, if your 401(k) gives you enough with some to spare, Jesus is saying “Woe” to you and me both.

But wait! Is Jesus saying that everybody who's poor or hungry, mourning or persecuted is blessed? Is he saying that everybody who's well-off, well-fed, happy or honored is cursed? Surely he's not saying that it's a blessing to be poor or hungry? (No, for certain to this last question.) These words shake us to our core. We're not used to such raw, unvarnished pronouncements. We don't want to hear that God's realm resides among those who have nothing but God.

If we're truly listening, Jesus' words shake us up; they jar us out of “faithful complacency.” They're so different from how we've been taught to live. Completely upside-down.

This is not the Sermon on the Mount that we find in Matthew's gospel. Those words are couched in spiritual language. These words today are hard. The God Jesus talks about today is not the God we generally proclaim. We're not sure we like this God. We certainly don't like the message.

This is the same response some of Jesus' first listeners would have had. Sure, some of them were poor, but people who are travelling from Tyre and Sidon would have had to have been comfortable in order to drop everything and come listen to Jesus.

Most Christians, at least in the US and other developed nations, tend to spiritualize these blessings and curses so that we don't have to apply them to ourselves. People interpret them different ways to blunt their sharp edge but the bottom line is: These lines challenge us.

When my sister Karen was growing up one of her favorite artists was M.C. Escher. Escher's drawings challenge the mind. In one picture, he has one hand drawing another hand which is drawing the first hand. In others, buildings that seemed perfectly normal at first glance, when you look closer become architectural impossibilities. Soldiers climbing stairs just keeps going 'round and 'round because there's no top or bottom to the stairs.

Escher shows us a world that is crazy, backwards and upside-down where everything is not as it seems. And while not as obvious, the same is true about the real world. We may be troubled by certain aspects of government or society but generally we accept that everything's normal. Yet it's not as God intends. Today Jesus flips everything and shows us the world from God's very different perspective. Far from being fine and normal, everything, Jesus says, is upside down and backwards.

Why would Jesus say this? As my once 2-year-old son would ask when I scolded him, "Do you still love me anymore?"

To be honest, Jesus' relationship with the people – including us – and with the religious institutions of the day was overspread, from the beginning, with ambivalence. When Simeon first saw this infant Jesus at the temple, he said, "This child is destined to be a sign that will be rejected... many in Israel will stand or fall because of him... the secret thoughts of many will be laid bare" (Lk 2:34-5). This pretty well describes the hope and consternation that follows Jesus' words and actions – then and now.

Jesus has just come down from the mountain where he had just chosen twelve from among his many disciples to be his closest circle. Crowds of people descend upon them. They come to hear him and to be healed. Energy is just flowing off of him!

I started practicing Reiki four years ago so I understand more about this energy now. With Reiki even I can serve as a channel for energy to flow, aiding healing and offering balance. Jesus is so thoroughly attuned to God that he's more like a beacon of God's healing energy. All who touch him are healed!

It's interesting to note that Jesus never asks people about their religious affiliations before healing them. Are they Jewish? Greek? Do they go to synagogue every week? Do they love their children? No, he just heals them. Could that be because he wants everyone to be able to hear his message, regardless of where they are in their lives? He longs for every person to be open to hearing about God's realm and how God expects us to live?

When we truly listen, we hear a message that is not easy. We hear that God particularly loves

those who are hungry and poor. People in dire straits need that love, and often know they need that love, more than the comfortable ones. When we truly listen, we hear that being Christ's disciple is not easy. For two thousand years, the ones who most closely lived God's message of hope, compassion and justice have faced persecution. Most of the initial twelve apostles were martyred for their faith as were many more since then. Even if no one kills us, we are often ridiculed when we speak up for justice for others of God's people who don't have it as good as we do. Yet Jesus tells us that if we are rejected or insulted for following God's way, we are blessed by God. We can know that God is cheering for us. If we end up crying or hungry or homeless, we can trust that God is with us, to comfort us and to help us laugh again.

Sometimes we pretend that things are all right as they are, when we rewrite our stories to improve on our spiritual pedigree. I'll use John Bell's story because while he's a contemporary theologian, he's also Scottish. So his story is not (quite) our story.

He'd always believed that Britain's connection with the slave trade was primarily an English business. He'd been to Bristol and seen the White Ladies' Walk and Black Boy Hill. Then in 2007, a book called *Scotland and the Slave Trade* blew his illusions out of the water. He learned that the Jamaica Bridge in Glasgow is a nod to the 45% of the plantations owned by Scots. St. Vincent Street similarly highlights Scottish connections to slavery in the colony.

During a period of Scottish history known as the "Clearances," absentee landowners sent managers into the highlands to evict peasant farmers in order to graze their sheep there instead. This was bad enough but the clergy of the day – accepting gifts for their services – colluded with the wealthy telling the landless subsistence farmers that this was God's punishment for their sins.

Our nation done similar things. When have we, as individuals, done so as well? There are moments in our collective pasts that we do not like to have recalled, either because they bear witness to our flawed natures or they point to a God who is not the patron saint of those who wield the power.

Yet Jesus knows that it is precisely into this tension that he must speak. He intends to penetrate the masks we wear and the cloaks of imperturbability we use to hide from the pain and injustice around us. He does this because he loves us and because his task is to help us face that God needs our efforts in order to right this upside-down world.

God needs us to be God's presence, not simply by erecting buildings to God's glory but, by comforting the afflicted and challenging through our words and our actions the powers who will continue with business as usual until it is no longer profitable for them to do so.

God loves us, always. Yet God loves the people of Venezuela whose president claims that no one is hungry enough to be dumpster diving. God loves them at least as much.

We humans try to fit God into a box. but God will not oblige us. God is always breaking down whatever barriers we construct to protect ourselves from God's message. This is what we find in today's lesson. This is why we need to hear it. God will not be contained. God's message – for all of God's people – is that God is always reaching out to us, loving us. And calling us back.

Amen.