

**6 Epiphany
February 17, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as god was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Someone much wiser than me once said:

*Grace is when God gives us good things that we don't deserve.
Mercy is when God spares us from bad things we do deserve.
Blessings are when God is generous with both.*

So, when have you been blessed? When have you desperately needed a blessing ... any blessing? Did you receive a blessing, even if it was one you didn't expect? And, assuming that God is alive in each one of us, who gave you that blessing? And, again, assuming that God is alive in each one of us, when have you been a blessing to another?

In today's gospel reading from Luke, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and popular." That's it in a nutshell. Boom.

Some context: As Luke tells the story, Jesus has just spent the night alone on a mountainside, praying before he chooses his twelve disciples, who, in Luke's gospel he also calls apostles. As morning dawns, he and the newly called twelve descend from the mountain to find a vast crowd waiting for them. The multitudes have come from everywhere ... even as far away as the northwest coast near Sidon and Tyre. They came to hear his words, and to be healed of their various diseases, and Jesus ... in his element, with power literally pouring off of his garments ... heals them all. Then, standing "on a level place" with the crowd, he tells his newly called disciples what discipleship actually looks like. Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and popular. Yep ... that's the fantastic Good News of the Kingdom of God. A world turned upside down. An economy of blessing that sounds ludicrous.

One quick aside at this point. This story of the "Sermon on the Plain" mirrors the account we hear in Matthew's gospel. Most scholars believe that the author of Luke's gospel and the author of Matthew's gospel had a common source. In Matthew the location changes so that it becomes the "Sermon on the Mount." The author of Matthew does this because he was directing his writings to a Jewish audience who knew very well the story of Moses, and so Jesus is the "New Moses" bringing the "New Law" down from the mountain. There are some other differences as well.

The author of Matthew softens things a bit by writing “poor in spirit,” instead of just “poor,” and “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” instead of plain old “hungry.” Luke keeps Jesus’s “Sermon on the Plain” raw, succinct, and close to the bone. There’s no way around it. As far as Luke’s Jesus is concerned, God’s favor does not rest on the well-fed, the well-off, and the well-liked. It rests on those who have absolutely nothing to fall back on but God. No credit line, no nest egg, no fan base, no immunity from tragedy, disease, loss of job or anything else. Nothing. According to Luke if you want to know where God’s heart is look to the world’s most reviled, wretched, starving, grieving, shamed and desperate people. Look around you at the people who are shaking in their boots about the diagnosis the doctor just gave them. Or, the woman facing an abusive husband. Or, the father of a teenager who meets a police officer at the front door at 3 in the morning. Jesus said that they are the fortunate ones. They are the blessed ones on whom God’s promise of more and better rests. Wow. I’m really not sure how to make sense of this. A friend and mentor ... James Rowe Adams ... once described religion as the “business of making sense out of nonsense ... making sense out of those things that don’t make sense.” If ever that were true, it is with this reading to us in these relatively comfortable pews.

I’m not really sure I know what to do with this reordering of priority and privilege. What I’m tempted to do is edit Jesus’s words to make myself feel better. After all, isn’t that what the Church has done for over two millennia? Jesus didn’t really mean poor, did he? Homeless poor? Dressed-in-rags poor? Slum poor? Jesus didn’t really mean hungry as in, literally hungry? Famished for any morsel of food? Hungry as in rib-showing starvation? Jesus couldn’t possibly have meant sad people as in, people drowning in grief and despair. People who weep aloud in ways respectable folks never do in public. Wouldn’t it be cruel to call them “blessed?” And surely he wasn’t referring to literal expendability. To those unlikeable, unpopular, unimportant people no one can blame anyone of avoiding. Surely Jesus was exaggerating. Clearly he was speaking figuratively. He was just trying to make a point ... wasn’t he? I mean, come on! There must be some way we can wiggle out of the “woes” column and into the “blessed” column instead, right? Right?

So, what are we to do with this reading? Wallow in guilt? Romanticize poverty? Avoid happiness? I don’t think so. The very fact that Jesus prefaces this hard teaching by alleviating suffering in every way possible suggests that he does not hold up misery for its own sake. Pain in and of itself is neither holy nor redemptive in the Christian story, and in fact, Jesus’s ministry is all about healing, abundance, liberation, and joy ... it is about living life in its fullness as a beloved child of God.

Also, Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain is not prescriptive. Nowhere in his litany of blessings and woes does Jesus tell his listeners how to behave. If we look carefully we see that what Jesus is saying is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone ... unconditionally.

So, I ask the question again: What am I ... cozy and comfortable as I am in my healthy, happy, First World, middle-class life ... to do with this Gospel reading? How shall I reflect on it? Receive it? Sit with it?

I might begin by admitting that Jesus is right. That is to say, I might come clean about the fact that most of the time, I am not desperate for God. As a priest in the Episcopal Church it is my business to think about God. Yet, in spite of that, there are times when I am not keenly aware of God's active, daily intervention in my life. Maybe I'm simply ignoring it, or I'm oblivious to it. But, I know I am not on my knees with need, ache, sorrow, longing, gratitude, or love. After all, why would I be? I have plenty to eat. I live in a comfortable home. I have both health and health insurance ... well, most of the time I have my health ... and I do have access to lots of doctors. I also have access to a vibrant social, intellectual, and recreational life ... I just got back from a week's vacation in Mexico. I'm not in dire need of, well, almost anything.

In short, there isn't much in my circumstances that leads me to a sense of urgency about ultimate things. If I didn't wear this collar, and work in a church, I could go for days without talking to God. I probably could go days without thinking about God. It would be very, very easy ... embarrassingly easy ... for all things deep and divine to become an afterthought in my life. This isn't because I'm callous. It's because ... as Jesus puts it so wisely in his searing sermon ... I am already "full." In his words, I have already "received my consolation." I have easy access to laughter, so I don't wonder what lessons honest tears might yield. I am primed by my cozy life to live in the shallows, willingly avoiding the struggle of diving deeper, and therefore unaware of the treasures that lie waiting in the depths. Most of the time, it just plain doesn't occur to me that I would be lost ... utterly and wholly lost, physically and spiritually ... without the grace of God that sustains me.

But, it hasn't always been that way, which makes this reading all the more powerful ... all the more compelling. I have known what it feels like to be shaking in my boots. I have experienced overwhelming fear of losing someone close to me. No, I haven't been so poor that I was homeless. And ... although I have been hungry ... I have always been able to scrounge up something to eat. And, as a white male in our society, I don't really know about being marginalized ... considered expendable. But, I do know about despair ... fear ... and sorrow for things I have done and not done. I do know about desperately needing a blessing. And, like it or not, I think we all have been there at some point in our lives.

I think what Jesus is saying in this Gospel is that we all have something to learn about discipleship that our life circumstances cannot teach us when we are comfortable. There is something to grasp about the beauty, glory, and freedom of our lives that we will never grasp until God becomes our everything, our all, our go-to, our starting place and our ending place. Something to humbly admit about the limitations of our privilege. Something to recognize about the radical counter-intuitiveness of God's priorities and promises. Something to notice about the mystifying power of plenty to blind us to our own emptiness. Something to gain from the humility that says, "Those people I think I'm 'better than' in every way? They have everything to teach me. Maybe it's time to shut up and pay attention."

In a beautiful reflection on Jesus's upside down kingdom, author Frederick Buechner writes this: "The world says, 'Mind your own business,' and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.' The world says, 'Follow the wisest course and be a success,' and Jesus says, 'Follow me and be crucified.' The world says, 'Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own' — and Jesus says, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' The world says, 'Law and order,' and Jesus says, 'Love.' The world says, 'Get' and Jesus says, 'Give.' In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion."

This is not prosperity theology. This is not "blessing" as health, wealth, and happiness. This is a teaching so costly, so soul-rattling, so unpalatable, that most of us will do anything to domesticate or ignore it ... that is, until it happens to us.

Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Why? Because you have everything to look forward to. Because the Kingdom of God is yours. Because God is the God of those who have nothing but him. Most of us know this to be true. Most of us have had our life situation ... health, happiness, fullness ... turned upside down by one tragedy or another ... by one diagnosis or another ... by one horrendous event or another.

Lord, help me to hear what this is saying. Help me not to squirm away. Help me somehow to sit with woe, and learn the meaning of blessing. And, when I am full, and laughing, and when others speak well of me, help me to look around at those who are hungry, or thirsty, or weeping, or who are marginalized, and find a way to be a blessing to them in their lives. Assuming that God is alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus ... we can be God's blessing to another.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, someone wiser than me said:

Grace is when God gives us good things that we don't deserve.

Mercy is when God spares us from bad things we do deserve.

Blessings are when God is generous with both.

So, when have you been blessed? When have you desperately needed a blessing ... any blessing? Did you receive a blessing, even if it was one you didn't expect ... even if the blessing was different than you had hoped for? And, assuming that God is alive in each one of us, who gave you that blessing? And, again, assuming that God is alive in each one of us, when have you been a blessing to another?

Amen.