

Sermon - "A Level Field"
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Luke 6:17-26 (NRSV)

17 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. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ 'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

'Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ 'But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ '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.

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

Sermon - A Level Field

Jesus is at it again – turning the world upside down with his radical message.

Jesus had come down from the mountain with his disciples. And as he came off that mountain, a crowd was waiting for him. There were other disciples, Jews from Jerusalem and Judea, and even Gentiles from distant lands of Sidon and Tyre. They had come from near and far to be

healed and to hear this man who had developed quite a reputation. Those who were sick reached out to touch him, to be healed. And he healed all who sought healing at the foot of the mountain, on that level plain.

Then he stopped healing the sick to speak to the crowd. I imagine that those who had been trying to touch him or trying to come near to him sat down when Jesus started to speak. I imagine it became quiet as all sat down with their eyes fixed upon him.

Then Jesus preached those words we heard this morning; on that level ground where all were on equal footing. He preached words that leveled the playing field between the poor and the rich, the hungry and the full, those who weep and those who celebrate. He preached to all who would listen.

And in Luke's gospel, before Jesus began to speak, he looked at his disciples. He was looking at them, preaching to them even though he was also speaking to the crowd. He wanted them to know that his words were meant especially for them.

Jesus really wanted them to know that society had it wrong. He wanted them to know that God did not look down upon those who struggle. God loved those who struggle. You see, in Jesus' time, if you were rich, you were favored by God. If you were poor, you were thought to be looked down upon by God. You must have done something to anger God. You or your parents would have done something wrong or else you would not have been poor or blind since birth or barren or suffering from other physical or mental illnesses. That's what people thought, way back then. Way back then.

But sometimes I wonder if we are so different now. I think that sometimes there is a stigma associated with being poor, or hungry or homeless. Think about it.

It is not uncommon that people who could benefit from assistance, whether through a government program or a food pantry, put it off for as long as possible because they don't want to be seen as a failure or looked down upon. My friend who is a hospice social worker has spoken about people who are eligible for government assistance but do not want to apply for medicaid because they are proud independent people who had worked hard all their lives and, to them, if they need assistance it means they can no longer be proud or consider themselves independent.

I know another social worker who asked for gift cards to grocery stores for some of her clients. But there was reluctance from those who willingly gave food to give gift cards. One of the

women believed that the social worker's clients would use gift cards to buy alcohol or cigarettes, because that was what she believed poor people do.

Or consider the woman who wrote a letter to the editor about her experience at a food pantry. She and her husband both had good, well-paying jobs. Then their companies down sized and they lost their jobs. They could not find work and had trouble paying the bills. They still had mortgage, insurance and tax payments. But they did not have car payments because their car was paid off. It was a nice car, an old Mercedes that still ran well. So one day she broke down and decided to go to the local food pantry. In that line, she received many disapproving looks – from volunteers and those who relied on that pantry. Because she had a nice car people assumed she was wealthy and abusing the system. But she needed help for a time. And when she did get back on her feet, she made donations to that pantry. She vowed never to judge someone who was in need as she would never know their circumstances. And her story is not unique.

In the 21st century, just as in Jesus' day, there are some people who judge those who are poor. But Jesus did not judge or condemn those who are poor. Jesus called them blessed.

Does that mean Jesus wants people to be poor? Of course not. If Jesus had wanted people to suffer, he would not have healed people of their physical or mental conditions. He would not have said that his mission was to bring good news to the poor.

Jesus' good news is that God loves those who are poor. Some denominations even speak of a preferential option for the poor. We can compare it to the parent of a special needs child. The parent of that special needs child often has to give more attention and care to that youngster. They tend to worry and be more concerned about that youngster than their other normal, healthy child or children.

Jesus tells us that God has a special place in her heart for those who are poor – those who are struggling to feed their family, get adequate health care, a good education, safety in their homes or neighborhoods or lands. Jesus also tells us that God loves those who weep. And God loves those who are persecuted because they work to do the will of God, even if it means telling people things they don't want to hear.

Yet, I sometimes think that the more troubling part of Jesus' message to that crowd was the "woe" part.

²⁴ *'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*

²⁵ *'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.

²⁶ *'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

Those words sound harsh, especially if we take woe to mean cursed as it is translated in some versions of scripture. That makes it sound like our fate is already determined. But, according to one commentator in a podcast I recently heard, "cursed" is not an accurate translation of the Hebrew. The Hebrew word in this passage means the opposite of "do not be afraid." It might be phrased that "you are about to get bad news." Then we can take it as a call to pay attention, as a warning, as an invitation to look out and see the potential problems you might have.* So, let's consider the words from The Message version of the New Testament.

²⁴ *But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get.*

²⁵ *And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it. ²⁶ "There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. (**The Message** Luke 6:24-26)*

Jesus is warning his listeners that wealth, a full stomach, happiness and a good reputation do not mean we are favored by God. If we have those things, we need to be careful or be aware, because "there's trouble ahead." Those indicators of success have the potential to become problematic. They can influence our attitude toward things, our neighbors and our God. Being successful or financially well can contribute to our thinking that we are responsible for our own success. We can forget that all we have is from God. We can lose sight of God. We can think that we are better than other people who struggle or are not as successful as we are. We can become proud; and pride can separate us from God and from each other.

Jesus preached a radical message, one that would turn the world upside down. Jesus looked at his disciples to let them know that it was their job to see those who are poor and those who struggle as God sees them; with love. It was their responsibility to work towards leveling the field, to give of themselves to help those who struggle and to love them.

We are Jesus' disciples today. Jesus is looking to us just as he did his disciples on the plain. We are the body of Christ, God's hands and feet and voice. We are called to be the ones whom those who struggle can rely on to show them that they are loved by God and by us. And we are called to let them know that we will work to help lift them up.

In today's gospel, Jesus came down from the mountain and healed those who reached out to him. His power went out from him. Jesus' love went out to them because his love is for all people. Then he shared his message that the kingdom belongs to those who are poor, the

hungry will be fed, those who weep will laugh, and those who are persecuted will be rewarded. Jesus may have been talking about God's heavenly kingdom. But each time we gather for worship, each time we pray "The Lord's Prayer," we pray for God's kingdom to be "on earth as it is in heaven." Let it be so. Amen.

* Podcast "Working Preacher Sermon Brainwave " Sixth Sunday after Epiphany/Ordinary 6C, February 13, 2022 - found at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts>