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Sixth Sunday of Epiphany

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We are delighted that you joined us today! We hope you will find us an affirming, uplifting, and committed family of faith. Here we work to make everyone, without any exceptions, to feel accepted, inspired, and encouraged in their spiritual journey. In dialogue, we seek to understand. In encouragement, we seek to heal. In all things we yearn to live by love, for peace, with joy. This is a place where your intellect will be challenged, your heart will be nurtured, and your spirit refreshed. Varying beliefs are expressed openly and freely, and your doubts will not be suppressed. We trust that we are all, every person and part of creation, continuing to be blessed by God's grace; and that in community we can help each other to see this grace alive in our lives and relationships. We hope to share our gifts with you, even as we pray that you will want to share your gifts with us. Whoever you are and wherever you may be in your life's journey, we invite you to be a part of our lives and our spiritual home. Welcome!

POINTS TO PONDER

“^{6.1}One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. ²But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’ ³Jesus answered, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?’ ⁵Then he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.’” — *Luke 6.1-5*

“It should be remembered that of the two main groups of Jews in Jesus' time mentioned in the gospels, Jesus was a Pharisee and not a Sadducee. Too often, people assume Pharisees were of the opposite perspective of Jesus on most things, or even enemies of Jesus' based on their religio-political differences. But on many of the basics, they all agreed. As we still see in religious faiths today, it is the differences of opinion within the same sects, more than differences between sects, that cause the most animosity.

Both Jesus and the Pharisees were of the same tradition, and they both knew the laws of their people written down in scripture. The difference, then as now, was in how to interpret the words and apply them to daily living. Working on the sabbath was contrary to the law. But here we see how Jesus interprets what work entails on the sabbath differently than his Pharisee brothers.

Luke describes the exact actions of Jesus which could have been seen as objectionable. Going into the grainfields was the first action. One could not walk for purposes other than worship beyond a set distance. Jesus even going into the fields, even if they were close by, could have been considered 'work' by a strict interpretation of scripture. The second action was plucking some heads of the grain, and the third action was rubbing them in his hands so as to get at the kernel. These actions, too, would have been considered work – especially if done for the sake of harvesting the grain rather than simply eating it for oneself on the spot. However, transforming the grain as he did by plucking and rubbing the heads were, strictly speaking, work. The fourth action is taking the just-processed grain he held in his hands and eating it. One was supposed to prepare any food the day before the sabbath so that one did not have to 'work' on that day, even for preparing food.

Jesus is playing loose with the traditional interpretations of what the law outlaws, for sure. And perhaps it was to solicit their response to reveal how they were too literalistic in their understanding of scripture and the law, and had forgotten the original intent of them by making them more important than the prescribed purpose.

Jesus already knew that some religious leaders were upset with him about prior interpretations he had of what scripture said, and these actions may have been his attempt to see who were the complainers and even enemies, and who had more open minds to consider his perspective. The Pharisees here, or at least some of them, do at least ask him (before rushing to judgment) why he is doing what they interpret as illegal on the sabbath. Notice that Jesus does not say that he disagrees that what he is doing is illegal, but rather cites the actions of the well-admired, David, who did something that would have been considered even more egregious than Jesus' own actions. David had taken (stolen?) bread from the holy of holies in order to feed himself and his companions. To have even entered into the holy of holies when he was not a priest could have had a severe penalty, even death, for violating this sacrosanct place. But to have actually taken the bread, which only the priests could eat, and eaten it himself while also giving it to his companions would have been the utmost taboo.

Jesus' point is that the hunger of humans outweighs religious rituals and laws, for the rituals and laws were intended to serve people in need rather than keeping them from fulfilling their needs. The Pharisees that criticize Jesus are legalistic in their understanding of the law, and they condemn the actions themselves that are 'illegal' without consideration for the circumstances, cause, motive, and intention of the ones who do the illegal act. It is as if we were today were to enforce the rule to not steal from a grocery store to someone who might otherwise would be hungry, malnourished, or even starve to death were it not for stealing the food. Is it better to die and let one's companions die, or is it better to break a law so that one can go on living?

What parent wouldn't steal food if it kept their children from starving to death? And what does it say about the systemic injustice in a society that someone even has to consider stealing food in order to live? Who is more at fault: the society which is so inequitable that there are literally people who are hungry, or the victims of that societal injustice who are only trying to survive? Jesus doesn't blame people for wanting to have enough to live on. His animosity is towards those who create laws and act in ways that perpetuate this kind of injustice.

Jesus is pointing out that he and his disciples, like David and his companions, were only doing what seemed reasonable for people who are hungry would do in order to survive. It is his commentary on how the Priests and religious leaders have put more value in the law itself than in the spirit of the law in which the laws were created. The spirit of the law is to help people. And, as often happens, people become more obsessed by living to the letter of the law for its own sake, than living by the spirit of the law for the sake of the people. This, Jesus insinuates, is what those of his own religious sect do. They both oppose the Sadducees who are known to be strict literalists of the law, and here Jesus is pointing out how those within his own sect have fallen into the same trap.

The 'Son of Man' is a phrase with different meanings depending on its context. Here we can likely assume at least two of its meanings apply: 1) that the son of man refers to humanity in general, and 2) that it may also include some reference to the Messiah. It likely does not include the meaning of the son of man as the judge of humanity, though a case might be made for this as well as Jesus is judging the legalism of the other Pharisees.

In Mark's gospel, we have an additional statement, *'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath,'* which clearly indicates that it is not only Jesus, but any human person, who is lord of the sabbath. People matter more than the rules that people make. And when we start giving more importance to the rules than the people who are to be served by the rules, we have lost sight of the spirit of the law.

Luke, as we have noted last week, has clear intentions of making Jesus be seen in his storytelling as the Messiah. Consequently, it makes sense to assume that the 'son of man' is being used here not only in the generic sense that could apply to David, Jesus, or any human person who is need, but that it applies specifically to Jesus as one who has been given a divine purpose. As in other scriptures, Hebrew storytelling is rife with occurrences of a single word being used with multiple meanings. Play on words, differing denotations and connotations, and suggestivity of words adds to the interpretive task of the reader – making the process of interpretation one that is as important to the hearer as to the writer. Indeed, Jesus' action here may indeed be used to induce multiple interpretations of his actions to help his hearers to think beyond the words and actions themselves so that they are brought into a living relationship with the scripture, and, more importantly, with the Spirit of God which is to be used in interpreting scripture." — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7 & 8/2021*

"⁶On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come and stand here.' He got up and stood there. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?' ¹⁰After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus." — *Luke 6.6-11*

"Luke continues to build the case for how Jesus and the other Pharisees are at odds with one another -- not only as to how they interpret scripture, but the dichotomous values they have that support those views. Jesus, like the scribes and Pharisees, is devoutly religious in being present in the synagogue on the sabbath. But whereas Jesus sees the sabbath day as an opportunity to help people, the other Pharisees see it as a day holy unto itself regardless of whether it helps people.

Sabbath days were constructed as a day of worship and learning about God and their relationships to one another, and to keep people from having to work every day of the week. It was to be a day of rest so the body and spirit could rejuvenate, rather than be taxed day after day without end.

On this particular sabbath, a man with a withered hand, one who couldn't work any day of the week, was present. Having heard about Jesus' power to heal people of illnesses, the Pharisees could have invited Jesus to heal the man as an act that blesses the deeper meaning of the sabbath as restoring us to right body, mind, and spirit. However, they see the occasion as an opportunity to accuse him of violating a rigid understanding of sabbath law if he, on his own volition, decides to heal the man. In other words, they are waiting to see if his compassion for others might be used to implicate him as violator of sabbath law.

Jesus notices their posturing and 'wait and see' attitude, knowing fully well that they are hoping to have him heal the man – not for the sake of the man himself, but so that they can accuse him of being an impious Jew who does not respect sabbath law.

Jesus has to see their behavior as abysmal in trying to find a way to disparage Jesus for being a compassionate person. The juxtaposition of his own attitude to help people who are afflicted versus their attitude of caring

more about legalistically following a law that has been perverted to actually keep people from being helped is clear to the hearer of that day.

Jesus has obviously been speaking, and he calls the man with the withered hand to stand by him, a signal that he does not ostracize the man or keep him at a distance in thinking he is accursed by God or unclean because of his infirmity. Jesus respects the man enough to stand beside him, and to bring him to the attention of all as one who is worthy of compassion rather than judgment. People with illnesses and infirmities were believed by many to be sinners that God has judged, and they likewise judged them for their unenviable circumstances.

Jesus asks the poignant question as to whether one can do good or harm on the sabbath, or whether to save or destroy life. Doing good and saving lives is the motive for even having the sabbath, and there were laws expressly forbidding doing harm or destroying life on the sabbath, as it was a holy day reserved for our connection to God and each other. Knowing they can't answer Jesus' question without being made to look foolish, they refuse to answer. Everyone present knows the answer to his question, but if they answer correctly, then they in effect would give him permission to heal the man; and that would go against their objective of trying to entrap him and lay blame on him for violating a sabbath law in which they have clearly not followed the spirit of sabbath itself.

With only words, Jesus tells the man to stretch out his hands. This phrase may have also been a euphemism for doing work. Miraculously, the man who likely hasn't been able to stretch out his hands for years is able to do so. We need not hear the response of the man, for we assume he was elated that he would be able to use his hands – to be able to do the work of God. But the Pharisees who have positioned themselves as fault-finders of sabbath-breakers rather than as mercy-givers of sabbath compassion are infuriated with Jesus for healing the man. They don't see the man's joy or celebrate the miracle of life-giving healing. Their hatred for Jesus blinds them to seeing this as an act that was appropriate for the sabbath; in the very spirit of why sabbath was created. They have come to serve their own sense of authority and power as the interpreters of the scriptures and law rather than as the helpers who aid people through a compassionate interpretation of the scripture and law.

Without saying it explicitly, Luke is indicating through this story that Jesus' critics are charlatans, and that they have perverted the very law itself by focusing on their legalistic interpretations of it rather than using the law to promote more compassion and healing of the 'least of these.' They immediately begin scheming on what they might do to Jesus to bring him down – in reputation, if not yet in wanting him dead.

Luke also reveals the kind of character of Jesus to do what is right rather than to not act out of concern for what might happen to him if he does. Not fearing what they might do to him, but trying to live by God's own compassion, he decides to heal the man in their presence on this sabbath day. He lives by integrity; they don't. He is not the cause of their anger. Their own misunderstanding of the meaning of the sabbath and having that misunderstanding publicized by Jesus' illuminating action is the cause. Their anger should be at themselves, not Jesus; but their pride has been wounded, and they scapegoat Jesus rather than taking responsibility for their own misunderstanding of God's ways.

How does their preoccupation with harming Jesus' image mar their own image? Why were they more focused on bringing another person down than in celebrating another person being lifted up? How do our motives in wanting the good for others, even to our own detriment, reveal the degree to which we are one with God's own Spirit?" – *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7 & 8/2021*

“¹²Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. ¹³And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: ¹⁴Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, ¹⁵and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.” – *Luke 6.12-16*

“Can you put yourself in the place of Jesus in seeing that there are people who are fixated in making you look bad even when you have done a compassionate thing for another person? How disillusioning is it for us when we see people who would rather tear someone down rather than to give thanks that one has been restored to right relationship with God and the community?”

Jesus is likely appalled by the behavior of his fellow Pharisees. He needs some time away to reflect, and to have his own spirit rejuvenated after confronting those with obvious malice towards him. As he often does when he needs time away, he goes to a mountain to pray and to consider his next steps.

Jesus likely knows that if he doesn't gain the support of real disciples who support him through thick and thin, his ministry may be short-lived. He will need the support of those who have eyes and ears for watching out for him, as well as those who will support the mission of changing the values of the culture. He hand-picks 12 of the disciples who have shown genuine interest in his vision of life.

12 is a number that has significance in the Jewish tradition – particularly in that there are 12 tribes of Israel, descended from the 12 sons of Jacob. In effect, Jesus becomes the new Jacob/Israel who is to father his people into a new age: the Messianic Age, which is to be a forever time of peace with justice in which God's values, rather than those of human empires, reign over all of the earth.

Luke lets us know early in his gospel that Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, will betray him. As with his fellow Pharisees, so with one of his disciples; Jesus' persona is polarizing for those who meet him. It is not either a love him or hate him scenario, but also one in which even love for him may result in a later rejection of him.

People's real characters are revealed when one like Jesus incites them either to follow more fervently in God's ways, or to instead justify their own ways as if they were God's ways. Love and betrayal, unfortunately, are more connected in life that we would hope they were. Even the other 11 disciples will deny they know Jesus or will abandon him in his darkest hour.

What does his selecting of 12 disciples affirm about Jesus given that he is aware of the human condition where loved ones may end up as deniers or even betrayers? What does it say about his character that he was willing to trust even one who would not prove to be trustworthy? How does his decision affect how we ourselves look at relationships?” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“¹⁷He 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.” — *Luke 6.17-19*

“Some commentators interpret the level place as a plain, but this is unlikely. Those familiar with mountain environments know that there are often level places on the mountain itself. His disciples had followed him up the mountain, and he selected the 12 while higher up on the mountain. Here it says they came down with him to this level place where more disciples and followers were waiting. Matthew's account has the sermon he is about to give also being on the mountain.

Luke portrays different reasons for people coming to see Jesus: to hear him, to be healed of diseases, and to be cured of unclean spirits. Many wished to touch him, believing that healing power emanated from his body – as they believed about other healers of that day. Without medical science to instruct them into the way of diseases and various behaviors that didn't seem normal, people adopted mysterious theories to explain why things happened as they did, and saw healers, like Jesus, as those who had magical or god-like powers.

The point Luke is likely trying to make is that Jesus had these powers as a result of his close connection to God. Living and acting in accordance with God's virtues and values is what was thought to make one holy and wise, and this spiritual proximity to God was also seen as a relationship with God that would enable one to do miraculous things. From our 21st century understanding, it is less important that we adopt the magical view of

reality that our ancestors had than it is for us to see what this means mytho-poetically. To be in tune with God's virtues and values does indeed give us a power that may seem to be uncommon and even miraculous. To live by ideals, rather than the way the world was, would be seen as evidence of the divine inhabiting a person – since most people did not have the spiritual courage and ethical integrity to buck the system that could easily put one to death for not obeying the laws and mores of one's society.

Common diseases, too, were seen in ancient times to have a spiritual component. And anyone with an 'unclean spirit,' which could include a wide diversity of atypical behaviors, was thought to only be able to be cured by one who had a 'clean spirit' or 'pure motives' or a 'virtuous character.' The power of touch was also more pronounced in their culture than our own. Touch, through massage, application of oils, or other methods were often done intentionally so as to heal a person of a wide assortment of ailments. However, touch could also be seen as defiling if one was healthy and others were not. Laws were enacted so that people with diseases deemed to be contagious must not only keep their distance from other people, effectively ostracizing them, but also would need to shout out to those approaching that they had a particular disease so that the 'clean' people would not be infected by the 'unclean' people.

Whether with his words, his compassion, or his healings, Jesus 'touched' people in ways they did not feel touched by most people. He had a way about him that drew people to him, as well as one that may make others envious. We may well wonder whether the issue of the Pharisees was really about their differences from Jesus in interpreting the scriptures and law, or whether it was out of jealousy for the attention he was attracting by the people who saw him as one who genuinely cared for them no matter what was their need or circumstance. Jesus example may have led them feel bad about their own selves in not living up to the values of God by contrasting their behavior with his. They were more concerned about regimented rituals and predictable routines whereas Jesus breathed a spirit of life into his words and actions. Jesus showed he genuinely cared for people, whereas the religious leaders often put their faith in the rituals themselves rather than the compassion for others that makes them feel like persons of inestimable worth." — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said:
‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’” — *Luke 6.20*

“Jesus begins now to preach what is called the beatitudes. They are a series of blessings, as well as woes or curses, in which Jesus reverses the values of empire by proclaiming the values of God. In this first blessing, Jesus looks “UP” at his disciples, pointing out that he has humbled himself before them as if their servant, and tells them things that would make them do a double-take. Every human empire has expressed that it is the rich and wealthy who are blessed in society, and not the poor. But here, Jesus says that it is the poor who are, or will be, blessed.

In the kin-dom of God, the poor are blessed, for God sees the value and worth of each person. Indeed, according to God's values, there will no longer be poor or rich; for everyone will have what they need, neither much more or much less than enough. No longer will there be disparity between people in the kin-dom of God, for we are all siblings of one another.

Jesus, in looking up at his disciples in teaching them this, reveals that the one presumed to be a teacher or master is actually a student or a servant. He will spell this out explicitly later on in his ministry; but here he does it via his juxtaposition between himself and his disciples – most of whom are themselves poor. In telling them that they, as poor people, have the kin-dom of God he is giving them hope and faith that their present experiences of oppression will not last, or will not be the defining aspect of their spiritual existence. They are people who are blessed by God even in their poverty.

‘God loves us **all**’ is the implicit message; not just the wealthy. We all are blessed, for God made us with God's own image.

Moreover, Luke may also be implying that the poor, who see the suffering of others as well as themselves, unlike the rulers and wealthy ones who barricade themselves behind walls where they do not have to look at the harshness that life heaps on the poor, are the only ones in a position to have compassion for one another. Do we not see that it is often those with the least who are most generous in giving what they have to others? The poor are blessed in that they know what real suffering is like, and they have empathy and care for those who have endured the same sort of trials in which they have endured.” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“²¹Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” — *Luke 6.21ab*

“In a world where some have lavish meals, there are far more who are malnourished and starving. The world Jesus envisions is one where the hungry will be fed and filled – not just with physical nourishment and nutrition, but spiritual nourishment and ethical nutrition. There will no longer be the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in the world Jesus envisions. All will have their fill of the blessings of life, for all are equal in worth to one another in God’s eyes.

This will require, of course, that the rich no longer hoard the wealth, food, and other blessings of life at the expense of others. Jesus imagines a world where anyone who has more than enough gives freely and generously to all who have less than enough. There is to be equality in the distribution of goods and services so that none feels like they are neither hungry for what they don’t have enough of, nor hungry for what they see others have that they don’t have. When none has far more or far less than anyone else, envy and jealousy are eliminated. We see each other as family, and want to do all we can for those who are our siblings in this world. We will fill each other up when God’s values are followed in our lives. We won’t wait for supernatural miracles, but will act on producing a more equitable society by our own actions.

Jesus has called his disciples to a lifestyle in which they have had to leave behind all they owned in order to go into the world to create healing for the sick, sustenance for the poor, and nourishment for the hungry. Do we feel blessed when we give to others, even when we feel ourselves in need? Is not the act of giving a tacit affirmation that we have enough such that we can give? And is that not a feeling of blessing – not in comparing our good fortune to the ill fortune of others, but rather in the joy of helping to ease another’s burden who we consider to be a member of our own family?” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” — *Luke 6.21cd*

“Jesus keeps up the counter-intuitive aphorisms that turns the values of empire on their head. Here he claims that those who weep now will be the ones who will laugh in the kin-dom of God. Consider the scenario where goods and services are indeed equitably distributed in society. If you were once poor, your status has been elevated; whereas if you were once rich, your status has been diminished. Who would be joyous in that situation if not the poor?

Jesus is asking us to think outside the box with these blessings. He is not saying that people who weep are more blessed than those who have no reason to weep. Weeping is not seen as a sacred endeavor in and of itself. Rather, he is speaking of the relative state of awareness and gratitude that occurs when one who has been weeping no longer has to weep – when their worth is judged by the rest of the society as equal to everyone else’s worth. To be seen as an equal when previously one has thought of oneself as inferior to others is a cause for laughter and joy.

The blessing is seen as the gratitude in having one’s being affirmed a child of God rather than an outcaste or enslaved person of society. We laugh and are joyous when we see a positive change in our social status. And might we not also laugh as we spiritually come to understand that we are just as blessed by God as those we imagined were far more blessed than ourselves?” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“²²Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.” — *Luke 6.22*

“Jesus reserves the most difficult of blessing to understand for last. Who would ever feel blessed if people hate, revile, and defame you?”

Well, apparently Jesus. For he has just experienced, so early in his ministry, the hatred of others for all that he is trying to do. His fellow Pharisees have come to revile and defame him, looking for ways to tear him down. In his time of prayer on the mountain, he would have wrestled with this contradiction that serving God would bring him so much grief for himself because of the hatred of others.

Without being specific, we may conclude Jesus found a way to see his integrity in following God’s ways as more of a blessing than the blessing of being loved, respected, and praised by those who claim to be serving God’s ways. He has come to the conclusion that it is better to serve and act in God’s ways for the sake of humanity (i.e., the ‘son of man’), even if one is despised and ridiculed for it, than if one forsakes doing good in order please those who have sought to serve themselves rather than to serve humanity.

Sages from all ages have pointed out the difference between being admired by the majority of people, and being admired by the very best of people and by God. When I think of the people I most admire in history, such as Jesus, Gandhi, and M.L. King, Jr., they are all people who were vehemently opposed by those in power, and even opposed by those who weren’t. They all had far more detractors when they were still living than they had supporters. And each of these three people, despite all the good they did for the people, were brutally killed. They were all hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed by the majority of people during their lifetimes. It was only after they were killed that they became martyrs and were memorialized as great people. And ironically, their martyrdom has often served to water-down the radicalness of their views – the very ideas which made them hated in their own time.

Jesus understood, before he was killed, that living by God’s values and ways would put him at odds not only with the most powerful and wealthy people of society, but also with the common person – and even with his closest confidantes. That is part of the tragedy of his death, that he was betrayed by one of those whom he trusted to be his disciple – one whom he let in on the inner workings of his ideas and plans to create a better world.

Here we see that Jesus rejects the consequentialism that affirms that good is determined by how things turn out, and instead adopts a virtue ethic which proclaims that goodness is done by being good – no matter how thing might turn out for you or for others. Living by God’s virtues and values is what makes one good; not whether one is a success in life, becomes rich or powerful, or any other of the criteria that empires use for determining those whose lives really mattered.

For Jesus, our lives most matter when we put aside our hopes and expectations that people will love us, include us, and respect and praise us for being a good person. That is not the way of the world; and it never has been. Our lives most matter when we do good for its own sake – no matter how we may be benefitted, and no matter how we may be oppressed for living by God’s ways that are in direct conflict with the world’s ways.”

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“²³Rejoice 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.” — *Luke 6.23*

“It is only possible to imagine someone who has been hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed to rejoice in that circumstance if we don’t literally think they are rejoicing at being treated this way. It makes no sense cognitively or experientially to rejoice when this has been the case. But if we consider that one has made their own will one with God’s will, where one’s sense of integrity comes from abiding in God’s ways rather than winning the approval of the people, then we can see how one could rejoice at having kept one’s dignity and integrity despite the abuse heaped upon one by others. Jesus came to this realization early in his ministry, and he followed this difficult path which he knew would ultimately lead to his rejection and death.

Jesus here, is less trying to affirm a view of the afterlife than he is to affirm the conviction of remaining steadfast to God's ways. The reward we receive for following God's virtues and values is this-worldly, whether or not it is also other-worldly. Notice the verb is in the present tense, not the future tense. The reward is here and now, for we gain the joy of knowing we have not caved into public pressures to conform to the world, but have instead endured the vitriol and persecution of those who afflict us because we honored God's ways over their ways.

Jesus reflects on the fate of the prophets before him, who were often abused, persecuted, and killed by asking people to live by higher standards than what they were willing to do. They detested the prophets all the more for reminding their consciences that they were not being true to God, but were only being true to their own selfish motives. Humanity has not changed in this way over the millennia, and Jesus' words to all who will listen are still shocking – especially to a culture like ours which equates wealth and power with God's blessings, and poverty and oppression with a lack of God's blessing.

Can we understand that rejoicing of our souls at living with integrity when our bodies, minds, and spirits are suffering at the animosity and condescension of others? Do we rejoice more at the approval of people, or at our imagined approval of God for following in God's ways despite the hardships of what doing so will bring to our lives? How do our answers to these questions reveal where our true loyalties lie?"

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“²⁴But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” — *Luke 6.24*

“Ancient people believed there was a kind of balance in life, such that if good things happened to some, then bad things would happen to others. Jesus has enumerated blessings for those that society has traditionally oppressed, and now he lists woes to those that society has praised and esteemed. At the top of the list are those who are rich. This may sound odd to those in our society, for wealth is routinely justified by the myth of hard work and smart decisions. But Jesus did not fall for that foolishness. He knew the hardest working people have always been the poor, and that the rich have profited at their ability to manipulate, coerce, use, and abuse the poor.

Jesus is opposed to the rich for they wouldn't be rich if they didn't steal wages and labor from the poor. If they truly cared for the poor, there would be no 'trickle down,' but rather a flood of compassion and aid for those who are struggling to make ends meet. If they truly cared, then they would give living wages, not what they could convince the poor to work for since they have no better options.

For Jesus, the only consolation the rich have is their own self-deception in thinking they are better, wiser, and more valuable than everyone else. God made us all as equals in worth, so rich persons only deceive themselves in justifying why they have so much and others have so little. They are, like the Pharisees earlier, so preoccupied with justifying how they look at things that they have forgotten how to truly care for others. They see token hand-outs and alms as acts of mercy that they imagine puts them God's good graces.

But God instead seeks justice rather than tokens of compassion. Justice is the social dimension of compassion; where we create laws so that everyone has enough rather than laws that only benefit the already rich and powerful. The hearts and souls of the rich are corroded with corruption, thinking that thoughts and prayers, and specific actions of benevolence and beneficence will be enough to help them gain a heavenly reward. But Jesus sees their values as antithetical to God's vision of an egalitarian society where we are all treated equally in worth and equitably in the distribution of the blessings of life.” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“²⁵Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.” — *Luke 6.25ab*

“While we see a literal reversal of circumstances between the hungry and the filled in Jesus' words, this is more of a literary device than it is his actual thoughts. Role reversals are part and parcel of Jewish lore, and Jesus follows in this tradition. However, he is not looking for the poor to become rich and the rich to become poor; for then the same inequalities would still exist, just with a change of characters.

Jesus has a vision that all economic and political categories will be erased in the kin-dom of God, for we will all be siblings, equals, of one another and we will never let our beloved siblings live in impoverished conditions nor in affluent conditions while any is hungry or suffering. Hunger is to be alleviated because no one will hoard what they have, but will give to all who are in need – not asking whether they earned it, but rather giving it because they need it to survive. This is what people who love one another do – they provide for each other’s needs because they value the person as one of sacred worth, even as God does.

There may be a time in which the full will ‘feel’ hungry, for they will no longer have much more than others, and this relative status they have come to justify will no longer exist. Just as hungry and poor people will know the joy of being equals, those who have been in a position of superiority over others will feel ‘oppressed’ simply because they are no longer advantaged over others. They will be hungry for being in a superior position once again.

But when they come to see that there is more blessing in empathetically caring for others as one cares for oneself, then they will realize that what they saw as a blessing of superiority was itself an illusion; and that their boost in ego was actually a detriment to their relationship with God and with their fellow human beings. In time, the society Jesus wants to build is one where we all feel blessed in being equals of one another. But in the time of transition, there will be those who feel blessed that once knew woe, and those who will feel woe who once knew what they took to be blessing.” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.” — *Luke 6.25cd*

“Ecclesiastes had told us that there is a season for everything, a time to laugh and a time to weep. And here we see a semblance of that perspective played out in this sermon of Jesus. The opposites seem to be necessities to one another in reality. If you have one now, you will have the other later. And, honestly, life does often seem that way.

But Jesus does not mean this to be a predetermined reality for us. It is not our destiny to experience both aspects of life. Indeed, he hopes for and has faith in a world in which the opposites will no longer be in contention with one another – that the positive virtues and aspects of life will have finally won the day, and that love, peace, justices, joy, and all the goodnesses of life will have overcome the evils of life.

Laughing and weeping are relative to where we have been, where we are now, and where we see that we will be. In the kin-dom of God, we will all be heirs of God’s love as God’s own children. And we will all love one another as equals as well. Depending upon our perceived social position in this life, we may feel like laughing or mourning in a world in which we are not better or worse than anyone else. For those who have felt worthless, laughter will be theirs. For those who felt better than others, they may mourn the loss of thinking themselves as superior. But when we all gain the perspective of God, then harmony will arise for we will have displaced ego and instead focused on how we can best help everyone who has a need to have their need fulfilled.

In God’s kin-dom we all work together for the common good of all. We want everyone to know all the blessings of life, and we will relish that no one any longer feels inferior or superior to others; for the real blessing comes from seeing our equality of worth. That is certainly something that should bring us all laughter.” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

“²⁶Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”
— *Luke 6.26*

“As shocking as it was to hear that those who are hated and reviled are blessed, it may be equally as shocking to hear that all who are spoken well of are cursed or will know woe. But from an enlightened spiritual perspective, it makes perfect sense. Most people aren’t enlightened, and they have not adopted the values that help us to see the valuelessness of opinions that are not grounded in reality. If people speak well of us, we easily assume that it is because we have done well or are good at what we do. But the too often reality is that people speak well of those they think they can benefit from, and as soon as they no longer see the benefit of their affiliation with people, the speaking well of them also goes away.

In Greek society, the sophists were always winning the approval of the masses by complimenting them and agreeing with them or telling people what they wanted to hear. Who doesn't like compliments, people who are agreeable to our perspective, and who tell us what we are pleased to hear? Likewise, there were false prophets in Hebrew society who did the same. But the thing is that people were not helped by these 'fake' people. They would not tell them truth, but rather what they wanted to believe was truth. This made the people credulous, and diminished their critical thinking skills.

When people like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Greek culture, and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Jesus in Hebrew culture, told people truths that they didn't want to hear, they all received harsh criticism by those who would rather hear niceties than truthfulness. When people become credulous, they lose the ability to think critically and soundly for themselves; relying instead on the platitudes of popular culture and the placations of manipulators to serve as their understanding of how reality is. This will always result in woe when one realizes, sooner or later, that reality is not truth when looked at with rose-colored glasses.

True prophets will speak the truth even though people don't want to hear it. People will resist, criticize, and persecute true prophets, for they don't speak so as to coddle and comfort people where they are, but rather speak so as to encourage and exhort people to move towards where they need to be. Socrates and Jesus were both killed for their truthfulness and counter-cultural values. But they are today respected many millennia after their deaths for having been true to truth. But there is woe for those who have capitulated to accepting feigned praise and ego-boosting lies to make them feel better for the moment.

The reality Jesus seeks for us is to not be swayed by public opinion, but only by what reason and God tells us are the virtues and values that make life truly meaningful and fulfilling. Humans have the proclivity to want to think of themselves as better than others, and so are easily manipulated by smooth talkers with words of honey. But the reality is that those same people who speak so sweetly may also be the ones who will speak with equal bitterness and hatred when you reveal that you are not to be swayed by their coercive compliments.

We set ourselves up for woe when we accept words, whether of praise or criticism, as the realities we most desire or want to avoid. But we set ourselves up for blessing when we develop the critical acumen to evaluate truth for what it is – no matter how others may try to convince us otherwise. Being spoken well of is not to be our objective. Rather our objective is to be one with virtue and with God's values and ways. Praise and criticism both arouse our egos, either acceptance or defense. But to pay attention to neither, focusing only on the truth that comes from a long-cultivated wisdom and a long-practiced virtue, is to become blessed as a child of God. Woe awaits those who do the opposite.” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/7/2021*

CALLED TOGETHER AS SPIRITUAL FAMILY

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Abbie Chronister

Affirming God's Presence in Us All

Welcoming the Light of Love in Our Midst

Abbie Chronister

We prepare ourselves for communing with the sacred as love's light is brought into our awareness. The light of love burns within and among each of us, and we carry that light into our sanctuary; visually reminding us of the image of the divine that lives in our hearts, minds, and souls – and that we nourish through our faith-filled fellowship.

***Centering Our Souls**

“Lives for Blessing”

Inspired by Luke 6.1-26

Abbie Chronister

Ordainer of the Sabbath: You grant us rest from our work, nourishment from our hunger, healing from our sickness, and empowerment from our weakness.

Make us mindful of how to refresh our minds, bodies, and spirits on days set aside to be holy.

We are grateful for the example of Jesus, who taught us to remember that the spirit of the sabbath is to bless and restore us to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health.

Keep us from hanging on to traditions that no longer bless, and to rules that no longer serve the interests of those most in need.

In the example of Jesus, help us to be compassionate to all whom we meet, and to assist in healing those in need of blessings we can provide.

Help us to support and not hinder those who are touching others with the gifts of compassion and wisdom.

When we encounter those who seek to criticize, blame, or accuse, teach us to find sacred space, as did Jesus, to discover your guidance and to move forward with carrying out your purposes.

Encourage us to choose to be close to those who will be disciples with us to help make this world a better place.

Speak through us that your will may be revealed. Act through us that we may help heal and sustain our world.

Make us mindful of your vision of how we are to be in relationship with one another.

May our actions bless the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed for their commitment to your ways.

Teach us how to live with others so that they will be enriched, filled, and inspired to laugh. May our practices help all others to feel loved, included, esteemed, and dignified.

In our hard times of compassion-fatigue, grant us moments to enjoy the integrity of having done our best, and the rejoicing for the lives that have been blessed by your Spirit revealed through us.

In all we think, speak, and act, help us to bless your people and creation, our siblings all around the world, by our commitment to be your children of compassion; now and always.

WE LISTEN FOR THE SACRED IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIVES

*Hymn of Choosing

“Once to Every Man and Nation”

#441 Pilgrim

A Time for All God’s Children

Abbie Chronister

Prayers

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns, and Acts of Compassion or Kindness

Silent Meditation: The Prayers of the People

Pastoral Prayer

The Prayer Jesus Taught (unison) *Please feel free to do the version you know, or the one below:*

“Our heavenly Creator, sacred be your name: your kin-dom* come, your will be done, on earth as if in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kin-dom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen”

*“Kin-dom” is an inclusive, non-authoritarian, and egalitarian term that reminds us that we are all “kin” as the children of God.

Scripture Lessons

Luke 6.1-26

Abbie Chronister

⁶1One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. ²But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ³Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?”⁵Then he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

⁶On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" ¹⁰After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

¹²Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. ¹³And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: ¹⁴Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, ¹⁵and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

¹⁷He 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.

²⁰Then 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 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.

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.

Message

"Blessings for the Formerly Unblessed"

***Hymn for Blessed Living**

"O for a World"

#575

WE DEDICATE OURSELVES TO GOD'S SERVICE THROUGH FAITHFULNESS

Giving of Our Tithes and Offerings

We invite you to place your offering in the containers as you leave, or you may give online or by mail. Thank you!

"Generosity arises from gratitude like heat arises from fire. Like fire, gratitude is lovely to see; but when it warms others with generosity, that is when it becomes a true blessing."

Special Music

***Unison Prayer of Dedication**

Abbie Chronister

We are called to be a generous people, always building up the Body of Christ. Let us not forget our calling, but to humbly, patiently, and gently live it day by day. Let us help bear with love the burdens of the weak, the poor, and the oppressed – coming to their aid in word, in action, and by sharing what we have with them. Let us all make every effort to build unity between ourselves and our brothers and sisters throughout the world, letting your Spirit lead and strengthen us so that we may create the bond of peace with justice that makes us all one. Let these gifts we offer today aid this calling we have from you, and so also aid those most in need. May it be so.

***Encouragement for the Journey**

Be the person by whom blesses others by your actions.
May the poor find the kin-dom of heaven by your generosity.
May the hungry be filled and sated by your hospitality.

May those who weep discover in you one who will cry with them until they can laugh.
And may those hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed by others in this world
be lifted up by your compassion and loving-kindness.
Be the cause for the rejoicing of others.
We serve God and our world when we are a fountain of blessings.
May the blessings you give overflow.

Postlude

Get In Touch with Us!

Questions?

Call 319-234-8927 or email us at
fcuccoffice@gmail.com

(Messages will be checked periodically)

Pastor Bret Myers: revbmyers@yahoo.com
Youth Director Abbie: abbie.youthdirector@gmail.com
Music Director Luke: firstconguccmusic@gmail.com
Organist Hudson: HUDSON.LOURENCO7@gmail.com
Office Manager Michelle: fcuccoffice@gmail.com
Custodian Kyle: fcuccbuilding@gmail.com

*Please make an appointment with Rev. Myers if you would like to meet with the pastor.
You may email him at revbmyers@yahoo.com, or call/text his cell at 608-370-9472.
Video talking is also available via Skype or Zoom.*

Nourishment for the Journey

Scripture Lesson Luke 6.1-26

⁶One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. ²But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ³Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?" ⁵Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

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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.

Luke, as noted last week, is clear in asserting that Jesus is the Messiah; and seeks to show how Jesus upends the values of empire for the values of God. Beyond the huge catch of fish and the emphasis on fishing for people that was mentioned last week in the first eleven verses of chapter 5, Jesus has, in the remaining 27 verses of chapter 5, performed more miracles; such as healing a man with leprosy, and forgiving and healing a paralyzed man who was brought down through the roof. There was no mention of the property destruction (though the forgiveness offered may have included that act), as the man’s illness and healing was the larger focus for Jesus.

This latter instance raised the ire of the Pharisees who thought that only God could forgive, while Jesus told them that forgiveness is something any of us could do – just as it is good to also do good deeds and heal people. Jesus cared more for helping people; not about matters of property damage, nor things like religious traditions and theological preconceptions. Yet he is not critical of them at first, but only points out his own view.

The Pharisees, however, see him, in another instance, eat with tax collectors, whom they regard as sinners. And Jesus once again reveals that God’s values in helping out the ones most in need are the things that he believes God would have him do.

For a third time in only 12 verses, they find yet another way to criticize Jesus. They see him eating and drinking with his disciples rather than fasting and praying like other prophets, such as his own cousin, John. Jesus’ response reveals that he comes with new ways that do not always look like the old ways, and that mixing the old with the new is not what will be best. They are concerned that he is not acting like “how it has always been done,” and he readily admits it; insinuating that the new ways, which are really God’s ways, are how they are to live in right relationships with others.

These are not huge issues in the bigger scheme of things, but the Pharisees seem intent on making them so. They have begun to “nitpick” at pretty much everything that he does; even though he is helping those in need.

It is interesting that the antagonism is all one way at this point in Luke’s gospel. Jesus seems to have no issue with the Pharisees and priests doing things as they do, even though he thinks differently than them about what should be prioritized. He even tells the cured leper to go to the priest and make an offering for his cleansing. Jesus seems to respect their authority, even though he would do things differently.

But they, however, do not respect Jesus; and they are peeved at the way he does things. They see him as a threat to their own way of doing things, even though he has made not so much as an insinuation discounting the validity of their methods.

But things begin to change as we reach chapter 6. Thus far they have found reasons to criticize Jesus even though in each instance he was helping others. But now they will criticize him (6.2) for helping himself and his disciples to some food in the fields on the Sabbath. They consider their plucking the grain and eating it as “work” – which the law says is illegal on the Sabbath. But Jesus has a different interpretation of eating so as to sustain oneself as not being work that comes under their strict interpretation of this Sabbath rule. He points out that David had done a similar, though even more taboo, thing.

On yet another Sabbath, they find fault with him once again – this time for curing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. It is clear that they have it in for Jesus. Nothing he does, no matter how it helps people, is considered legitimate if they can find any way to construe it as somehow violating a religious law.

Jesus has finally had enough of their shenanigans, and asks them a question which effectively shames them into not answering. He asks: *“I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?”* The question gets to the point, for they all know that the law was created so that more good than harm would be done for people, and that the law always tried to save lives rather than destroy them. And yet, most of their criticisms of him were for acting in the spirit of the law to help and save people from their afflictions. To answer Jesus in saying that the law prohibits us from doing good on the Sabbath would not only reveal that their own criticisms contradicted the law, but would also undermine their authority as interpreters of the law. So they were silent and said nothing.

Looking at them while they refused to speak, Jesus healed the man with the withered hand, and the anger of the Pharisees increased to a fury. The lines had been demarcated. Jesus healed a man of a withered hand, and his antagonists were furious about it. Jesus was for helping ailing people, and they were all about letting them suffer in the name of their traditions.

To any Hebrew person at that time, it was clear where the sides were drawn – and who really cared about the people. Indeed, the very healing Luke represents here is pregnant with meaning. The man Jesus heals had a withered hand. The hand is the agent of work, and also a symbol of generosity. With a withered hand, the man could not work, or be a blessing to others in the community. He was dependent upon the people around him. Jesus heals the man so that he can both work, and also be able to give back to society. He gives the man purpose again, helping him to not only help himself, but also others.

But the Pharisees, while they may not have minded that the man could be productive and generous after being healed, was more focused on scoring political points against Jesus than in celebrating the healing of this man. In doing so, the author of Luke insinuates that the ones with the truly withered hands are the Pharisees themselves who not only don't help others, but find ways to not let others, like Jesus, help them either. They are all about who is control and who has the authority to do things, not whether the things done result in blessings for others. They have forgotten the spirit of the law, the reason why the law was even created, and instead have come to use the law for their own purposes and ends – even to vilify people who rubbed them the wrong way.

Are we listening? Are there not people in our own society who are so enthralled with controlling things that they have forgotten to serve the people most in need? Are there not those who are so preoccupied with nitpicking that they fail to see all the good that someone may be doing for others?

In this toxic situation, Jesus leaves the scene. He goes “out to the mountain to pray.” This is a common occurrence we will see when Jesus has confronted those who can only see the negative in regards to him. Jesus does good things for people, and yet his enemies find a way to twist it around to try to make him look bad. Who wouldn't need some time alone to gather one's thoughts and try to recharge?

It is after an evening of being in prayer that Jesus decides that now is the time to call the rest of his disciples. He needs to select people who he believes will have his back and who will walk with him in trying to change the values of the wider culture with their testimony and deeds. Of the various followers he has around him, he calls 12 of them to be his most intimate disciples, those he calls apostles (i.e., “appointed representatives”). They would have to be individuals who bought into his vision, and who sought to come to the aid of those most in need while trying to overturn the values of empire and adopting the values of God.

These 12 he took up higher on the mountain with him when he called them to this greater service, and to be his constant companions in the larger mission. After spending time with them up on the mountain, he descends to a lower part of the mountain where there is a large flat place where many more followers had gathered. Apparently, it was a very large crowd – coming from far and near. Many came to hear him speak and/or to be healed of their diseases. People were trying to touch him, believing that he had power that emanated from him that would cure them of their ailments. And Jesus, it says, heals them all. All who want healing, receive it; for that is how Jesus operates. There is no need for health insurance, or copays or deductibles. There is no need to be wealthy enough to be able to afford care that you need. It is offered freely and generously to all – not according to one’s perceived value in the society, but simply on one’s need to be healed. What a radical idea, eh?

And then he preaches his sermon which included what we now call “the Beatitudes.” In this sermon he contrasts between those he considers blessed, and those whom he believes are cursed or will be filled with woe. And it is the exact opposite of what human culture and empire have told people about who is blessed and cursed. The words are still a bit shocking to our own ears, as what he says doesn’t make sense in accordance to what our own culture of empire tells us.

Here are the people Jesus claims are blessed: the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who, like him, are hated by others for doing good. They are the blessed, for the world is about to change. The Messianic Age is coming, and they will see their dire circumstances changed into reasons for rejoicing. The value systems of empire are to be overturned, and God’s ways are to reign in our lives. There is to be equality not only of people’s worth, but also in the distribution of goods and services in people’s lives. Everyone is to have enough. No one is to have too much, and no one is to have too little. Everyone is to be cared for, just as Jesus has been caring for all of the sick who have been brought to him without him asking any background questions, or whether they are able to repay him for healing them. In the world he envisions, everyone is to have their needs, not their wants, met.

Now, for this to happen for the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the hated, something else has to happen. Power, privilege, and possession has to be stripped from the wealthy and powerful – the ones with far more than they will ever need. And Jesus spells this out by telling us for whom woe is due. Who are they that will come to woe: the rich, the full, the laughing, and those whom all speak well of.

Did we hear that? Let’s listen again. The ones for whom will receive woe are the rich, the full, the laughing, and those whom all speak well of.

When the Messianic Age comes, these people will not have everything while others have little or nothing. The distribution of all that we have collectively will be equitable among us all – each receiving in accordance with their need.

We will discover later that Jesus is not looking for a mere role reversal of the situations of the poor and rich, the hungry and the filled, the weeping and the laughing, and the hated and the admired. No, that would only result in the same sort of system where some dominate and some are dominated. Rather, he envisions a world where we are all equals – in pretty much every way that affects social status.

Today many would disparagingly call that “socialism” – as if it were a bad thing that equality was achieved and everyone had enough. But quite honestly, Jesus’ vision is far more radical than socialism. It is much closer to what I’d call communalism.

In this world guided by God’s plan for humanity and creation, a reenactment of the Garden of Eden, there will be no possessions, no money, no hierarchy, no one privileged more than another, no one oppressed, no one treated as less than, and no system for some and another one for others.

Humanity would cease having everyone living for themselves, for everyone would be living for everyone else and everything else. I don't know the authorship of the quote, but it would be a situation like the one here described: "Nothing in nature lives for itself. Rivers don't drink their own water. Trees don't eat their own fruit. The sun doesn't shine for itself. Flowers don't spread fragrance for themselves. Living for others is the rule of nature."

What if humans started living by this rule of nature? That is what Jesus was trying to get us to do: live for one another.

This doesn't sound like the "American Dream" of everybody looking out only for themselves does it? And this is why, as a follower of Jesus, I preach against the "American Dream." It is a selfish dream. It is the kind of dream that narcissists envision for themselves at the expense of others. It is the exact opposite of Jesus' dream...of the dream of God for us, where we love one another as we love ourselves. "As we love ourselves" denotes equality, not preferentiality for ourselves.

The Beatitudes is a complete abandonment of self-centered thinking, and everyone trying to do their best to get ahead. Instead, it is the avowal of the intrinsic worth of each and every one of us, and everyone trying their best to do right by one another.

Folks, our culture has deceived us into believing in the values of empire rather than the values of God. It has claimed that we are Christians, not by our love, but by our bloated wealth and power. Are we listening to Jesus, or to nationalism, capitalism, oligarchy, and greed? Where do our real values lie, and are they in line with the Beatitudes?

Jesus sought to create a world where there were no 'haves' and 'have nots'...where there was no ownership of property, but all were to be blessed and provided for like the birds of the air and the animals of the field and wilderness. His spirit was much more in line with the people's who we dominated in this country, indigenous first nations peoples, than with the values of Western civilization.

In a quote attributed to Chief Seattle, I can readily hear Jesus ask the same questions: "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?"

Everything and everyone is sacred in Jesus' eyes, for we are all created by the same God. We are all siblings of one another. And we are to take care of one another. All are to be blessed, not just the few.

Is this what we believe? Is this what we are willing to work for, and for which we will dedicate our lives? Do we understand the meaning of the blessing where the poor will be no more because they are provided for? Where the hungry will disappear because all will be fed? Where the ones who weep will only do so for joy at their blessings, and never at the deprivation of their circumstances? Where those once hated for their good deeds will now be praised for their goodness to others?

The Beatitudes are rarely quoted by churches that would have you believe in a "prosperity gospel" where God wants the faithful ones, and only the faithful ones, to thrive and succeed. That is part of the American Dream, not the dream of God or Jesus. Jesus wants a world where we all love one another as we love ourselves – no less, no more.

Thank God for Jesus, and how he asks us to reject the false values of empire. Blessings let us be.

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/4/2022