

February 13, 2022. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

The Lord tests the mind and searches the heart. In this moment of proclamation, O God, may our hearts and minds be receptive to you and your way. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6, verses 17-26. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

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. 18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And 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. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. 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.

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Of all the problems that afflict our world, I think we would all probably agree that here in the Santa Cruz the most visible problem is homelessness.

It's a true crisis here with no easy answer, and those in the middle of it, those without homes, suffer greatly.

Not just because of a lack of permanent shelter, a place to call their own, but because of the way we treat unhoused or unsheltered people.

It comes with such stigma and shame. So much so that people often won't even look homeless people in the eye as they pass them on the street. It's so shameful, we won't even look.

Today's scripture in Luke is part of the Jesus' sermon on the plain, named so because Jesus delivers it on a level place, a plain.

It's similar to Jesus' sermon on the mount in the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus preaches the beatitudes.

But the sermon on the plain is a bit different. It's shorter than the sermon on the mount. And the blessings are a bit different. There are fewer, and they are terse and direct.

In the sermon on the mount, the blessings are in 3rd person. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven.”

Here, in the sermon on the plain - the blessing is 2nd person. “Blessed are *you* who are poor, for *yours* is the kingdom of God.”

And most notably, the sermon the mount doesn't include woes... but in the sermon on the plain here they are.

Gathered to hear Jesus' sermon on the plain is a large crowd. A great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

Yet, Jesus speaks not to the crowd - though I'm sure they heard - but verse 20 tells us Jesus speaks directly to his disciples.

And some 2,000 years later - we can be sure that when reading this passage, these blessings and woes, Jesus too is speaking directly to us. The church, his disciples, not the crowd that might surround.

The Gospel of Luke is the Gospel of reversals. Christ comes and turns the world upside down. and with it our cultural and society structure. This gospel, it is the gospel of the reviled, the persecuted, the alien.

During Advent I preached on Zechariah and the birth of John the Baptist. Zechariah - the priest of high social status - his son becomes a servant to Christ the King. While Mary, a lowly poor teenage virgin of no social status, gives birth to the mighty King. A world reversed, and we see these reversals in our scripture for today.

In the text leading up to today's passage Jesus had gone up a mountain to pray.

At the beginning of our scripture he comes down to the crowd and stands on level ground. Our scripture tells us that the people came to hear him *and then* be healed.

But Jesus *heals them all first* **and then** begins to speak. But the most obvious reversals are those who are blessed...the poor, the hungry, those who weep. While the rich, the full, those who laugh...woe to them.

This is reversed from a world who loves the rich, the full, those who laugh, and who hates the poor, the hungry, and those who weep. And looks on them with shame and disgust.

It was the way of the world 2,000 years ago to the people standing on that plain. And it's the way of the world now - to us in this sanctuary.

And in both times, these words are shocking to hear.

So shocking, that we might try to explain Christ's words away, saying perhaps they're a metaphor, or maybe like Matthew's gospel it's supposed to be poor in spirit, maybe woe to those who are rich perhaps with greed or power etc.

But on the sermon on the plain Jesus speaks plainly, simply, and literally. Blessed are the poor. Woe to the rich.

Just as in last week's scripture passage where Simon Peter *literally* left everything behind to become a disciple, because that was the cost of discipleship, so too should we take Jesus' words here literally. Jesus is saying plainly exactly what he means.

So, if we take his words literally, Jesus tells us blessed are the poor, you who are hungry, and you who weep.

It's easy to hear these words and think that Jesus is endorsing poverty and suffering, but in the gospel that calls for a world reversed, Jesus will always be on the side of those who suffer.

These blessings are promises to those who are suffering in this world that God still sees them, loves them, and is intent on their thriving.

Perhaps David Ostendorf describes it best when he says "God's blessings do not fall on 'the poor' simply because they are poor. The utterly reviled and expendable of the earth are the favored of God's blessings. For those who are poor or suffering because of unjust economic and societal systems - these words are words of joy, of celebration."

As you know, this month is Black history month. No community in the United States has suffered more violence, persecution, hatred, and systemic suffering in history of our nation.

Yet, if you attend a black church, (*and if you haven't I would encourage you to do so*) the joy is overwhelming in their holy space.

The blessings of Luke chapter 6 are sung and preached with righteous joy - because that is what they are.

Here in our county, state, and country, we are worried about the church (specifically the white protestant churches) dying out.

But in the global south, in underdeveloped countries where socioeconomic insecurity is overwhelming and access to basic human needs can be scarce, the church is spreading like wildfire.

Because for those who are suffering, in Luke 6 Jesus speaks to them, for them, and of them.

They are blessed just as they are now - and in the kingdom to come.

Christ is always on their side.

The destitute poor, those who have systematically suffered, those who are hated for what they don't have, those whom we shame - David Ostendorf again says: "The destitute poor have nowhere to turn but God. God watches over them abundantly in God's way - not the way of the world: they will be filled, and they will laugh, and they will inherit the kingdom

of God. To be disciples is to follow in this way. To be blessed of God is to have nothing but God.”

For those of us who are not poor, who have constant access to food and have days filled with laughter because we live our lives in comfort, who have much to turn to - this is a tough message to hear - a message of woe from Christ our king.

But we are not doomed. Before Christ spoke to his disciples, all were healed.

We do not know among the all healed in the crowd if they were the blessed or the woe. But we know they were all healed.

So for those of us who find ourselves on the side of the woe, as disciples of Christ, we hear Christ words as a challenge to discipleship.

For bringing God’s kingdom here on Earth means a world where those who are poor, hungry, those who weep now, are rich in the kingdom to come. From these blessings and woes - Jesus shows us that while the Kingdom of God’s values are difficult and radical - in fact the reverse from the world we know and live in now - it’s possible for us, all Christ’s disciples, to live those values now. And thus take part in bringing God’s kingdom here on Earth.

We do this not only by giving generously our material means to support systems and organizations that are helping the poor, the hungry, the weeping - that see their value and blessedness and work for a just economic system where all flourish - but also giving our time and energy, taking part of the work, physically giving our all.

I think the biggest reversal in our passage today is perhaps the most understated one. In verse 19 Christ heals them all, for power came out from him.

He gave his all to those people to heal them, so much so that perhaps he even fell to the ground in exhaustion. Because in the next verse Jesus LOOKS UP! Looks up at his disciples to speak.

Christ our savior came down from the high hill, gave out his power, and lowered himself so much that he had to look up.

For us, his disciples - maybe bringing the values of God’s kingdom into our world right now is as simple as looking up.

For here in Santa Cruz, and everywhere, when we pass a person without a home, without monetary resources, without consistent and reliable access to food and shelter, instead of turning our head down to look away because our world and culture teaches us that they are shameful -we look up - we look them in eye and see their blessedness. For theirs is the kingdom of God. And we can do our part now to help them receive it.

Thanks to be God. Amen.