

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany (c)
Jeremiah 17:5-10 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 Luke 6:17-26
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
February 13, 2022 (Traditional)

Today we hear those familiar words, like lightning bolts: Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry, blessed are you who weep, blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, and revile you on my account. Lightning from the sermon on the mount. But notice how in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is speaking those words in a different location. Today he's speaking to them from a level place, not from the top of a mountain. In fact, Luke says that this time, Jesus is looking *up* at his disciples while he's speaking those words. And we'll get back to that, because it points to something beautiful about our Savior.

Also unique to Luke is that here Jesus adds warnings to the blessings...the **woes**. As in, "woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full, woe to you who are laughing, woe to you when all speak well of you." So in Luke, we get this stark opposition between a blessed state of existence, and a potentially cursed state of existence. On the one hand, if you're empty, sad, poor, and miserable right now, good for you. You will be blessed. But, if you're on top of the world right now, if you're feeling like your life is complete and things couldn't be going any better for you, then...well...careful. So let's all go home now and try our best to be miserable and poor, and let's make everyone hate us on account of Jesus so that we can be blessed by God.

That's not what Jesus is telling us, is it? I *wish* it was in my power to do something to gain these blessings that Jesus is talking about here. I *wish* making myself poor and miserable could save me. But Jesus is clearly not giving us a prescription for blessings here. He's just telling us the truth. If I am truly poor, sad, hungry, and hated and excluded and reviled—that's the definition of me being **out** of control of my own situation, isn't it? I mean—what do you have, when you're sad, hungry, rejected? Nothing. Nothing except *hope* that something better is going to come your way. And that is exactly the state of being Jesus defines as blessed in this passage. If I'm empty in myself, all I have is hope that something good will come to me from outside myself. I'm completely opened up, and dependent upon something out there, beyond myself. And Jesus is saying, "yeah...that's a *good* place to be."

On the other hand, when I feel like I need nothing, when I feel complete in myself, when nothing more needs to be added to my existence—when I'm on my jet ski in the Caribbean—then woe be to me. It just doesn't seem right, does it? Doesn't God want me to have joy? Of course he does. He wants me to have everlasting, daily joy, not just a few mountain top experiences. In this passage, Jesus is pointing out what the power of sin does to us. It makes us assume we can be complete in ourselves. The enemy is always whispering in my ear, "you can be full without God. You can be your own god. You don't have to look beyond yourself, what your mind can grasp and what your eyes can see and what your hands can hold." In that state, everything we do is about adding to ourselves, completing ourselves. We get this illusion that someday we can actually get there—to that place where we don't have to answer to anything or anybody. For me, it's Naples Florida.

Years ago, I read a good biography of Howard Hughes, the gazillionaire entrepreneur aviator businessman. There's a lot about Howard Hughes that I really admire. I personally like him. It really struck me when, towards the end of the book, the writer basically concluded that everything Howard did in his life—all of his amazing accomplishments—came out of this inner drive just to have his own space. He just wanted to get away from anything that tied him down. He just wanted to be finished, complete, self-contained. And as you may know, he actually came very close to it at the end of his life (in this world, anyway). Sadly...on drugs, cooped in a Las Vegas penthouse with all the shades closed.

That illusion--that we can be finished, that we can be complete in ourselves as human beings—can even take on a religious shine for us. Look at today's second reading. Paul is writing to these Corinthian Christians—some of whom don't believe in the resurrection from the dead anymore. You might ask, how is that possible, a Christian not believing in the resurrection of the dead? Well, it *is* possible, if you think Jesus came to complete you as you are today. As if now, he's made you a sealed product. You don't have to struggle anymore. You're finished. There's no further need to grow in Christ after confirmation. It's like, your baptism was not the beginning of a journey, but was more like a fire insurance policy. Now you've got this magical spiritual quality, this *glow*. You're under no threat anymore. There's no future out there that you need to strive for. No mission or purpose bigger than yourself. That's what the Corinthians were trying to do with Jesus...make him a figure by which they could make themselves *final*.

And Paul chews them out. He tells them, you're not done. You still need to die every day, die to yourself, die until the old Adam, the old Eve, is completely dead. You're not finished. Faith is not being complete. Faith is depending every day on what Jesus has completed for you. Paul points out to them how, now that so many of them don't feel the need to listen to anybody anymore, now that so many of them think they're complete, now that they're not going out into the world in mission for Jesus anymore and have all that free time, well...it's no wonder that they spend all their time now comparing themselves to each other. If there's nothing more to this faith than being complete with Jesus, then what else am I going to do with my spare energy but try to prove that I'm more complete than my fellow Christian? It all devolves into religious posturing. That's exactly what's going on in Corinth; that's why Paul writes a really juicy letter to them.

The good news, and the challenge, of today's gospel is that the Kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus, and you and I can trust it. The future that God promised—all the fulness of those blessings—are now ours in Jesus Christ. It's not a magic pill that makes us complete. It's a promise that Jesus has fulfilled, and we can trust it. When Jesus says "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the rejected," those statements are like lightning strikes of the kingdom of God into this broken world in which we're living. Jesus brings that kingdom and all those blessings to us. Today's gospel right here and now, is the Word of God breaking into our lives, breaking us out of our self-containment, breaking through our fear of death that makes us close in on ourselves. This is God speaking, telling us we can trust him. We don't need to build ourselves up anymore. In sin we use our resources—our time, our gifts, our wisdom, our intelligence, our inventiveness, our money, our compassion, our love—we use it all to build ourselves up, and yes we might accomplish wonderful, good things on that road. But the end of that road is self containment. Self-completion. Which is to say: Death. In faith we use all those resources to witness to Jesus, who is the end of all things. And the end of that road is...Jesus. A personal relationship with the

source of all life. Today, tomorrow, and for all time, I can live for the One who created me, who loves me, and who saves me, who will never stop revealing new beauties to me.

As Christians, we look at this world today, and I'm guessing a lot of us think it's kind of a mess. And without God, the mess is all we would see. And we'd react accordingly. We'd build our walls and try to stay apart from it, stay above it, as much as possible. I don't blame anyone like Howard Hughes for trying to fly away from it all towards self-completion. But as believers, we look at this mess and we see Jesus hanging on the cross for us in the middle of it all. Telling us that no matter what we see, no matter what is coming down the road towards us, he will be here with us now on this road and he will meet us fully, face to face, at the end of that road. We'll never be complete, not even in heaven. We were never built for completion. We were built for a relationship with the one who feeds us continually with his endless life.

I love that as a Christian, I can look at this world and my life, and instead of saying "when will this end? When will finally I get to the top of the mountain?" Instead of that, I can say "praise God in Jesus Christ my Savior who humbled himself. Who came down to my level. Who poured his life out on a cross for me, and broke through the power of death that keeps me locked up in my fears. Who breaks my heart to the core when he speaks up to me...yes, he speaks *up to me*, and says "BLESSED ARE YOU." As a believer, I can look at this world and my life, and instead of saying "when will this end?" I can say "Praise God in Jesus Christ! What I have with my Savior right here, right now: this will never end!"