



“The Great Reversal”

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

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Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Jesus didn't get a chance to finish his first sermon. You might remember the Gospel Lesson two weeks ago. Jesus' inaugural sermon was in his home synagogue in Nazareth. He dared challenge one of his congregation's cherished assumptions. They believed that God preferred them and their kind to foreigners. Jesus suggested that form of divine entitlement blinded them to God's will on earth. Before he could finish, his angry neighbors chased him out of town.

He moved to Capernaum where his message received a better hearing. The next thing we read, he preached another sermon, this time in Capernaum. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. Luke's version of this sermon is much shorter than Matthew's version and seems even more radical.

Take today's Gospel Lesson for example. The lesson is Luke's version of The Beatitudes. Luke gives us four beatitudes; Matthew has nine. Luke adds corresponding curses; Matthew has none. In either case, Jesus challenges some of our basic assumptions and cherished convictions.

Jesus starts with a benediction. His followers are, of all people, blessed by God. But then Jesus gets pretty radical. "Blessed are you poor. Blessed are you who are hungry. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you who are hated...."

So far, so good. Then comes the hard part – at least for people like us. "Woe to you who are rich. Woe to you who are full. Woe to you who are happy. Woe to you who when people speak well of you...."

That sounds downright un-American. We came to this country to be affluent, feed our families, be fulfilled and get along with others. Those are inalienable rights alongside life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Most of us are unabashed capitalists. We believe wealth is or can be good. We want everybody to prosper and believe God wants us all to live a good life. Prosperity is, we believe, a sign of God's blessing. We study, go to the right schools, take strategic jobs, work hard and more often than not, reap some measure of wealth. Even the average among us are wealthy compared to the rest of the world. More than one affluent Christian has commented on their prosperity with these words, "We are so blessed."

Jesus sounds quite un-Protestant. Protestants have always tended to be middle-class and above. We invented the Protestant Work Ethic and believe in hard work, rewarding hard work, the accumulation of wealth and the proper use of wealth.

But it sounds like Jesus disagrees with us. To say the least, this text is a challenge to a congregation of prosperous Americans like us. In fact I wish Jesus never said this, or Luke didn't remember it.

But the text is there and we have to deal with it. It's a text that polarizes faithful, well-meaning Christians. Some quickly travel over to Matthew's version and interpret poverty, hunger, weeping and hatred spiritually. Jesus' disciples, in this interpretation, are poor "in spirit." That is we are humble. We hunger but our hunger and thirst is for righteousness. This version is more often than not adapted by religious and political conservatives and is often accompanied by a blind eye toward the poor, hungry and downtrodden of the world.

Others take this text quite literally – radically even. Based on these Beatitudes, they oppose the accumulation of wealth and often set themselves against wealthy people. Because God loves the poor, even prefers the poor and opts for the poor, God opposes wealth and wealthy people. These interpreters, usually theological and political liberals and quite often professors of theology, easily despise people like us in their commitment to the poor of the earth.

So, how can this text be good news? Can it speak to people like us short of guilt and judgment? How should we understand Jesus' radical statements, this one in particular?

Well, the Beatitudes, along with the Sermon on the Mount, are part of a larger story. According to Luke, to this point Jesus has been collecting disciples. These men and women formed the new community called the Kingdom of God. Here in the new community, God was at work creating a people committed to and embodying God's will on earth.

Many of Jesus' disciples, maybe most, were poor, hungry, sad, and outcasts. People in his world were rich or poor – and the vast majority were poor. Up front, Jesus informs us, contrary to popular opinion, they are blessed. They, of all people, are in God's kingdom on earth. And that means a better life for them. They will be fed, comforted and embraced.

But some of Jesus' disciples were not poor. Peter was a businessman. In a few paragraphs, Luke will tell us that Joanna, Susanna, Mary and some other wealthy women traveled with Jesus and supported him financially. Zachaeus became a disciple of Jesus. He was very wealthy, Luke tells us. But he along with all Jesus' followers redirected his life and, in his case, his wealth, toward God's mission on earth.

Whatever else we say about Jesus' teaching, it is also true that Scripture teaches that wealth is a gift from God – and a blessing. And, God says, affluence is a gift that carries consequences. The affluent have a responsibility to care for the poor and needy

It is also true Scripture clearly teaches that poverty, hunger and grief are not, and never will be, God's will for the world. The law and the prophets warn sternly about predatory evildoers who oppress the poor.

Moreover, the prophets declare, someday God will end all poverty, hunger, and need and usher in a new day of prosperity for all. Greed will be overcome by generosity. In that day, everyone will share the bounty of the earth. It will be like a great feast, and all have a place at the table. Peace and justice will be established in the land. Violence and violent people will be banished forever.

Jesus called that day the Kingdom of God. And, he proclaimed, that day is here. God was inaugurating a new community with a new vision for life. "Come join me in establishing God's will on earth," he proclaimed. "Commit your life to God's mission here and now."

The question for Peter, Susanna and all the others, affluent and poor alike, was simple but profound. Will you trust God to do what humans have failed to do? Will you give your life and your resources to God's cause?

Those early disciples risked their lives, staked their souls, and entrusted their means to God's great mission on earth: the Kingdom of God.

One of great prophets of God, Jeremiah, like the Beatitudes, uses the blessing/curse formula to make his case for God. The issue, he says, is in whom or what do we trust?

Cursed are those who place their trust in their own resources and/or other mere human powers. That was not easy for the prophet to preach. Things were grim for the prophet and for the nation. The king was weak; the government was corrupt; faith was being perverted to serve the politics of convenience. And the next great Empire, Babylon, was on the move, and Judah stood in its way.

The king was busy making alliances to hold off the inevitable. He bought off the prophets of God to assist his profound denial of reality. He surrounded himself with counselors who flattered him and agreed with his blind analysis of the looming disaster.

Jeremiah saw through it all. Depending on Egypt in this crisis is like leaning on a thin stick, Jeremiah told the king. The stick will break and stab your hand. Your corrupt administration will collapse on itself. It's only a matter of time. Listening to the flattery of corrupt prophets and counselors is utter folly. No military force, no political schemes, not even our collective wealth can save us. Those who trust in these human resources are like shriveling shrubs in the desert heat.

But, the prophet continued, blessed are those (kings and citizens) who trust in the Lord. They recognize their own personal and collective resources are not adequate for life or salvation. They depend on resources from beyond to sustain life and faith. They are nourished by spiritual springs that enrich the life and the soul. Such people are like a tree planted by a river. They flourish in the worst of circumstances. Nothing can move them or destroy them.

Now you decide. Will you live out of your own resources or God? Your health, your life and your future are all matters of the heart.

Wealth and poverty are much larger matters than money. Poverty in the bible includes physical poverty. But the word is larger than that. The poor often depend on God more than the wealthy simply because they have no other resources. Dependence on God is the larger issue. According to the prophets, all those who cast themselves on God are the poor of God. And God gives all who trust in God resources of body and spirit that nourish life.

And those who become part of the kingdom of God, you are particularly blessed. We are in the care of a God who passionately cares about poverty. Poverty is not nor ever can be God's will for humankind. And in this new community, God's kingdom, we are among people who are committed to God's will, and therefore, committed to our care and welfare. And because we are being reshaped into the form and character of God's heart, we are deeply committed to the poor and needy of the community and the world – because God is.

Next week we will have special guests, Jan and Anna Svetlik. I met Jan when he was a boy in Husinic, Czech Republic. His father was then pastor of the Czech Brethren Church in that town. I preached in the church the Sunday we were there. It was just a year after the fall of communism. Far off places like Husinic still had not experienced the fresh winds of liberation and affluence. As I stood before that congregation of plainly dressed people

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with faces worn by struggle, I wondered what on earth I had to say to them. After all, they survived the Nazis, then the Russians, faith intact.

During the final hymn, an elderly woman shuffled to the front where a large spray of lilacs adorned the communion table. It was Pastor Svetlik's birthday. The woman slowly removed lilacs from the arrangement and made two smaller bundles of lilacs. She shuffled over to Pavel and handed a bundle to him. Then she made her way to where Gloria and I were seated and gave a bundle to Gloria – a sign of hospitality.

After church I stood with Pavel and greeted people at the door. An old man with a brief case stopped in front of me. He stooped over and opened his brief case. Inside were papers and a few books. He reached inside and pulled out a small jar and handed it to me. My translator explained to me it was honey that the man collected from hives in his back yard. He wanted me to have some as a gift of his love.

That congregation knows about wealth and poverty. They helped each other survive the ordeal of occupation and constant harassment. No one was allowed to stand alone. No one went hungry. They also know about the rich resources of God and the community in a desert place. And, I suspect, they have a passion for the poor and needy of the earth beyond ours.

God calls us to commitment to God's will on earth. And so we entrust our lives to God and we imitate God's deep and eternal passion for the poor, hungry, sad, outcast people of the world. We will be the richer for it!

Amen.

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