

*Sixth Sunday after Epiphany*

February 17, 2019

Sermon by Pastor Gordon Braatz

The Holy Gospel from Saint Luke. (Luke 6: 17-26)

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

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

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

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

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 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.

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

“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.

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

The Gospel of the Lord.

In the name of God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal, holy and merciful. Amen.

Unless you have just arrived from another planet, you cannot help but be aware that we have already entered into another election season. As candidates announce their intentions and begin to lay out their programs, we are hearing more and more about how things have gone astray and how they would make things different. And one thing candidates of every persuasion now are accused of is tailoring their message to conform to just what people want to hear.

Well, one thing the Gospels make abundantly clear is that Jesus did not fashion his message to please those who heard him. If anything, the opposite was true. Time after time, we find the Gospels telling us that people were puzzled or offended or enraged by what he said. And it was that way from the beginning.

In the reading from two weeks ago, we heard of the unpleasantness at Nazareth when Jesus preached his first sermon there. You will recall that that sermon went quite well, at least at the beginning. Until, that is, Jesus started to say to those listening to him that they did not have a corner on the love of God, and that people they despised were more likely to receive healing and salvation than they were. The people got so angry they threw Jesus out of town. Some of them would have killed him right then and there if he hadn't managed to slip away from them.

Now, one would think that an experience like that would have caused Jesus to reassess his approach, to tone down the rhetoric, to go easy on the audience. He didn't finish that sermon at Nazareth. Well, that's an understatement. But he is not deterred. It is clear that he stayed on message in what he said and what he did. As in the Gospel for today, for instance.

What we heard is Luke's version of the Beatitudes, from the opening part of Jesus' first long seminar on life, and faith, and goodness, and prayer, and love. In few words, Luke sets the scene for us. And the scene is important because it tells us a lot about Jesus. According to Luke, Jesus had just spent all night on the mountain in prayer. Then he came down from the mountain and stood on more level ground, where he was quickly surrounded by people from all over the place. Some of them were already convinced of what Jesus had to offer to them, and some were still trying to figure him out. But I think it's safe to say all of them wanted something.

There were a lot of sick people in the crowd, Luke says, and a lot of disturbed people – desperate people looking for answers, looking for healing, looking for hope. They were there because they had heard about Jesus. People were saying you only had to get close to him and miraculous things might happen. People were talking about fevers disappearing, and paralysis disappearing, and demons disappearing. If you could just get his attention, there was no telling what might happen. He might even turn your business around, as he seemed to do for Peter, the fisherman, when he brought in that great catch of fish. And then, right afterwards, Peter had left fishing altogether, and nobody quite understood that.

Apparently, there was nothing Jesus could not do – if you could get near him, that is – which is why people were trying to touch him. And that made it all the more remarkable that he stayed right where he was, where people could grab at him, and poke at him, and pull on him. I suppose anybody else would have hired some bodyguards. But Jesus didn't seem to mind. Or, if he did mind, he stayed right where he was and gave himself for these people. Some of them, no doubt, were really hurting. And I suppose some of them were just greedy and were trying to get something for nothing.

But Jesus didn't draw any lines. He stood there among them. And his very presence by being there was delivering a message before he said a word. And, when he did speak, Luke says it was for the disciples. But, since they were all standing in the midst of the crowd, the words must have been meant for them to hear, too.

The form of what he said was really not unusual. Probably everybody in the crowd had heard this sort of thing before. We call the form a beatitude. And beatitudes of one sort or another had been around a long time – short, pithy statements about what constitutes the good life. We heard them in the first two readings today, a little bit from Jeremiah and a little more in the Psalms.

We hear this sort of thing, too, but we don't always realize it. Our advertising is full of these kinds of statements about what is the good life. But the wording is different, and so we really don't make that connection. For the most part, what we do hear is very predictable, because we've heard it all before, and it is exactly what we expect.

But what the people listening to Jesus that day expected was not at all what they heard. Not little bits of wisdom that they had heard before, but things turned upside down. *"Blessed are the poor."* *"Blessed are those who are hungry, who weep."* *"Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you, when they revile and defame you."* It was a shocking turn-around, of bad things for good things, in which blessedness is equated with the very things people work hard to avoid. No matter how hard we try to put a spin on it, it is not a list any of us would have written for success, or prosperity, or even in a way to help others.

In Matthew's Gospel, there are nine of these upside-down beatitudes. In Luke's Gospel, there are only four, plus the four "woes" that Luke wrote down. The woes have mirror images of the beatitudes. And, again, things are all turned around, for now suffering is equated with the very things people do their best to achieve: wealth, and food, and happiness, and esteem. *"Woe to you who are rich,"* Jesus said, *"for you have received your consolation."* *"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."*

It is hard to know what to make of this, but one thing is clear: How we react to this will depend a lot on what side we are on. If you happen to be poor and hungry, what Jesus said sounds pretty good. But if you happen to be well-fed and well-off, well, then none of this goes down very well. I suppose our problem is most of us in this place are on the well-fed side. Not many of us had to overcome great obstacles to get here today. And if our stomachs are growling, it is not because our cupboards are bare. By global standards, nearly all of us would be considered rich; some of us hugely so. And that causes many of us to head straight into guilt. We deal with that guilt where we can. But it's hard. I haven't noticed many of us selling everything we own and giving it to the poor. But at least we do some thinking about the inequality of it all. And that is a good thing, because in our society the inequality is great.

Every day we find more indications that the rich are getting richer, and the poor are sinking into hopelessness. And we have to be concerned. Of course, some of us have heard all of this so many times that we just ignore it. We put it in the same file as all the other good advice nobody we know has ever followed.

But the thing is, the beatitudes, those statements, are neither guilt statements nor advice. There is nothing to suggest that Jesus was telling anyone how they should behave. He is simply saying the way things are is not the way they will always be. He is saying that God's ways are not our ways, and in the end God's ways will prevail.

*"Blessed are you,"* Jesus said. And then he listed a whole set of characteristics we would never include as indications of the good life. And I wonder if what we have here really is a signal to us to open our eyes, to enlarge our categories, to recognize signs of God's love where we would least expect it. And if we have done that, then we'd better also look at the other side, and keep ourselves from getting too attached to those good things we experience, things that Jesus says are not going to last. What we do is, well, there are many things we can do. First of all, we'll have to leave it to God to deliver the kingdom, to turn mourning into dancing, and to provide the kind of peace that only the world has never known. But there are things we can do – to care, to comfort, to reach out in love.

You see, I think that we, who at the moment are not poor or persecuted or burdened with grief, have an assignment to carry out – not because we have to, but because we can. We cannot do everything, but every one of us can do something. And today is a good day to begin. For wherever life takes for us, we are sure to find there are people who are heavy with hurt, people who need what we can offer. Seek them out. Listen. Be available. Share. We may find that the poor and the persecuted and the bereft are not just people we can help, but people who can help us, if we will let them.

Of course, none of this is easy. But for followers of Jesus it is not optional either. The Gospels make it very clear that we are to seek justice, to be generous, to reach out to others in goodness and kindness and love.

And if we do that, then, in God's own time, when the whole world really is turned upside down, we might dare to hear Jesus say to the likes of us, *"Blessed are you, for you were rich and filled, and you enriched others and fed them."* *"Blessed are you who knew laughter and love, for you brought happiness to others and love to their lives."* *"Blessed are you."*

Amen. May it be so.