

6th Sunday after Epiphany C 13 February 2022

Luke 6:17-26

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace and Peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“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... “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.” Let's pray...

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the ones who are weeping, and the rejected. But woe to the rich, the full, the ones who are laughing, and those accepted. Before you start checking yourselves off against this apparent list of virtues, and praying for a reversal of fortune, let me pose a question: Can life really just be reduced to a mundane, relentless, inescapable treadmill of reward or punishment?

Jesus has a way of messing with our expectations, our beliefs, and our aspirations for the direction of our life. More often than not he turns our usual perspectives upside down. His view of what life, meaning, power, and success look like – a.k.a. the Kingdom of God – is mostly at odds with the world's view and sometimes our own. And if today's gospel is a hard message to hear, it's an even harder life to live.

It asks us some hard questions. It asks us to look at our life in light of Jesus' blessings and woes. Maybe today's gospel challenges:

- Where you find meaning;
- Your aspirations in life; and
- How you want to be in the world and in relationship to others?

It's easy to hear the blessings and woes in today's gospel as opposites; a list of rewards and punishments or a categorisation of saints and sinners, but that would be a misunderstanding of the gospel. There's nothing inherently virtuous or holy about poverty, hunger, grief, or being rejected. God knows that the world doesn't need more pain or misery. And there's nothing inherently sinful or wrong about being rich, full, laughing, or accepted.

Jesus isn't talking about what or how much we have or don't have. It's not about a bottom-line calculation of our bank balance, the number of meals or calories we get each day, whether we spend more time crying than laughing, or a popularity contest. Jesus is talking about a quality of life, not a quantity.

He's talking about how we are in the world, not what we are. And I know from my own life that when I'm poor, hungry, weeping, or excluded; whether materially, emotionally, or spiritually, I'm more open and receptive. I look for new and different ways of being in the world. But when I'm rich, full, laughing, and included; I want more of the same. I don't want to upset the status quo; I don't want to change anything.

Maybe the blessings and woes are descriptive of two different hows of life. The first is one in which our hearts, hopes, and aspirations are open to the coming of something new, something different. We're open to the future, to one another, to the possibility of what seems impossible. And where there's a future there's life, and more life. It's the kingdom how of our life. The second way of being in the world, the other how, is closed to the future, to each other, to something new or different. That's when we're self-enclosed and self-sufficient. We're bound to the world as it is, and it becomes our treasure.

I'd like you to think of blessings and woes as guardrails on the road of life. Like those guide rails kids use when they're learning how to play ten-pin bowling. Think of them as guides that help us discern God's will and maintain focus on his kingdom.

Have you ever played the hot and cold game? Maybe you played it as a kid or with your own children or grandchildren. It's a bit like "I spy with my little eye." Someone picks an object in the room and the other players have to guess what it is. As the players move about searching for the object, they're

told, “You’re warm. Getting warmer. Now you’re cold. You’re ice cold.” It’s a way of telling the players whether they’re getting close to or moving away from the object. Maybe the blessings and woes are Jesus’ way of saying we’re either warm or cold toward God’s will and his coming kingdom, getting close to or moving away from it?

You see, God’s kingdom isn’t a what. It’s not a place or a time or a thing. It’s a how, a way of being. You and I make people aware of what God’s kingdom is all about by how we are in the world. The kingdom is God’s dream, hope, desire and longing for the world. It’s God’s call to us. And it’s up to us to respond and follow it. Sometimes we do; sometimes we don’t.

From time to time, God permits us a glimpse of his kingdom through how we are in the world. That’s what we remember and celebrate today. We remember and give thanks for Jesus whose how of life revealed God’s kingdom and life by his life, his teaching, his willingness to be sacrificed for our sake, his love. And when we follow in Jesus’ footsteps, we too give witness to the existence of God’s kingdom, to God’s how of being.

Some of these witnesses are well-known saints; the ones who stand out in history. Peter, John, Mary, Paul, Luke, Polycarp, Augustine, Luther, Francis, Theresa. Others are local and specific to us. They’re not on the church’s liturgical calendar and their only place is in our heart. Think of all those who have been your spiritual guides and mentors in life.

Some have died. Others still live. All of them stand with us as teachers, examples, and guides. They have cared for and nurtured us, loved and guided us, taught and mentored us. They’ve shown us a how of being that’s vibrant, alive, holy and healing.

God’s kingdom comes through how we are in the world. It mostly happens on the margins, at the edges, and rarely on centre stage. The kingdom comes whenever we love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us, turn the other cheek to those who strike us, give to those who beg from us, welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked; when we forgive those who don’t know what they’re doing.

Every time we do to others as we would have them do to us, we teach them something about God's kingdom.

So, how does that change your outlook, knowing that in your own small ways, that you have the privilege and calling to bring the kingdom of God into existence? It's easy to identify ourselves as sinners, but we are at the same time, by the grace of God and the righteousness of Jesus, saints; ones whose how of life matters and makes a difference to others and to the world! Wow!

What if we were more intentional about stepping into the how of sainthood in our particular time and place, in the unique circumstances of our life, in our daily relationships? What would that look like?

Saints, I don't look at you and see sins to be pounced on; lives to be judged and called to account. No! I see blessed children of the Most High going about his business of reconciling the world to God by introducing people to Jesus and bringing God's kingdom closer to people's hearts and lives. God bless you all with perseverance to run the race and all glory be to Him who dwells in your hearts. Amen.