

Sermon – 6th Sunday after the Epiphany
Luke 6:17-26
February 17, 2019

“Well Bless My Soul”

If I say the word “bless” or “blessing”, you’d think something pleasurable, a source of gratitude. Prayers before a meal are called ‘table blessings’ and we’ll even include farmers, grocers and mom before home cooked meals or cooks and wait staff in restaurant versions. By second grade most Sunday school kids have learned “Count your blessings, name them one by one, count your many blessings see what God has done”. We call our kids (and grandkids especially) “little blessings” (as well we should!) In giving a personal testimony, a believer will tell you how much the Lord has “blessed em.” And there’s scarcely a church in North America that hasn’t conducted a stewardship campaign under the theme “Blessed to be a Blessing.”

So what in heaven’s name is Jesus doing to this wonderful, positive word “blessed” in our story today from Luke? Used in a religious context the Greek word translated as “blessed” means “fortunate recipient of divine favor”, and could be rendered “O the happiness of”! When in verse 23 our Lord speaks of folks excluded and hated for his name’s sake, Jesus says “rejoice” – the very same word the angel Gabriel said to Mary and translated – “greetings favored one.” Mary, in being faithful to God could have been stoned to death and certainly would have been “spoken about” in her town and likely not well of! This conception of blessing seems far removed from ours. We say blessed and think the numerous good things we have. Jesus said ‘blessed are you’ to people who didn’t have much of anything.

Then, in the next breath, Jesus says folks who have “blessings” are cursed – employing a word that connoted physical pain – as though our Lord was saying these folks were “hurtin.” How can we begin understand Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, a close though not complete version of Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount.” To say the least it’s counterintuitive if not insensitive. And I mean that, because there is nothing good about being poor, hungry, in grief, and being thought of, for Jesus sake, as an idiot or a menace.

People who are poor are not happy about it or content with it. They endure it, adapt to it, and make due, but they wouldn’t mind not having to. So let’s set aside one common take on this lesson – the one that speaks of being poor or hungry or in grief as drawing a person closer to God, focusing us on what matters, not being distracted, as Luke would later say of a woman named Martha, “by many things.” There is nothing simple about being poor or hungry, and there are plenty of distractions that come with being an oppressed or persecuted person.

To understand what our Lord is teaching we must appreciate the Old Testament understanding of “blessed.” God did “bless” Israel with land, crops, families, and so forth. But the initial instance of the word blessing or blessed referred to Israel’s purpose as the descendants promised to Abraham and Sarah through whom “all nations of the world would be blessed.”

Mostly blessed referred to one's relationship to God, as in Psalm 1's "Blessed is the one who does not walk...in the council of the wicked...but their delight is in the law of the Lord" or Psalm 32's "blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven", or 33's; "blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." There we think good things – yes, but we can't ignore Psalm 94 which says; "blessed is the one you discipline O Lord" and, for our purposes today Psalm 41's "blessed is he who has regard for the weak" and 106's "blessed are they who maintain justice."

Deuteronomy 27 and 28 tell of when Israel was about to enter their "promised land" after 40 wilderness years. God gathered them between two mountains - Gerizim and Ebal in the central part of Palestine – on land that was a "level place." There the Covenant of Sinai was restated through a series of "blessings and curses" spoken by leaders of the 12 tribes who stood on those mountains. "If you fully obey the Lord your God" they shouted from Gerizim – then no facet of life in Israel would want for blessing. Curses ("woes") came from Ebal. They would come if the people substituted other gods for the Lord – other words for his. Which among other things meant that if the weak of Israel were disregarded and justice elusive for all its children it would not go well for them "in the land the Lord your God will give you."

Blessing would come so long as they longed for things that God longs for – and virtually everyone who is poor, hungry, grieving and persecuted longs for something called mercy. God plays no favorites, and when we speak of his mercy and grace we dare not insinuate that the poor deserve Jesus more and the rich less. But when you don't have a whole lot else going for you, it's easier to look to a life to come than life as it is, and when you have much it's tempting to think resurrection might not be much of an improvement. The prophet Jeremiah helps everyone understand these edgy words of Jesus, by saying the difference between a blessed life and a cursed one is all about what that life trusts, depends upon, and has confidence in. And if you don't want to take Jeremiah's word for it how about a prophet of another sort - Jerry Garcia - who once said "when life looks like easy street you've got trouble at the door."

If you have the blessings of this life, give thanks for them, even if you don't count them one by one, and as the Lord leads, use them compassionately. But remember, blessing as the bible understands it isn't something we reach for and try to keep but something that comes to us apart from our own merit, which we can never lose. True, in his "Sermon on the Plain" Jesus kindly calls the world's "losers" and sternly calls out those we might label "winners." But grace, unmerited, operates on a level playing field. By it Jesus calls everyone into a Kingdom that can only be received by faith, and only does one thing, though very well - turn sinners into the most blessed people imaginable. Blessing is the esteem in which God holds you and the future God has for you. AMEN