

Liturgical Day: The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Date: February 11, 2007

Sermon Title: Blessed are You... Woe to You

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

My boys love action shows. While I was working on my sermon yesterday morning, I stepped into the family room to check on them and see what they were watching. It was a cartoon entitled "Lunatics Unleashed." It featured all the old Looney Tunes characters that I remembered watching when I was a kid: Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd, the Roadrunner and Wiley Coyote, Sylvester the Cat, the Tasmanian Devil, Yosemite Sam... but they were dressed in space-age costumes, and hurling through the air on flying scooters. There was just as much dynamite and just as many cliff falls as when I was a kid, but now the scenes last 10-15 seconds each, and it comes at them in a lightning fast blur of images. My boys love action shows, and yesterday morning they were glued to the tube as Bugs and the gang entertained them.

My boys love action shows, and I love action sermons. I'm not looking for a Pastor to preach, while hurling through the air on a flying scooter (although that does sound fun), but I love a sermon that leads to action; a sermon that tells me exactly what to do. Forgive your brother. Care for the poor. Support the church. Spend daily time with God. When a sermon lays out God's word for me, and tells me exactly what I need to do in order to be faithful, that is my favorite kind of sermon. An action sermon.

Unfortunately, this week's text does not lend itself to that kind of a sermon.

As St. Luke tells us the story, Jesus has spent the night on a mountain in prayer. When day comes, he calls twelve of his followers to become his central group of apostles. Together they come down from the mountain, stand on a level place where a great crowd has gathered, and Jesus begins to teach. He teaches with strong words: words that run counter to almost everything the world holds to be true. The people of his time were just as impressed with wealth and good fortune as we are today. And to them, he says: *You are blessed if you are poor, or hungry, or weeping, or hated by others.* I would love to have seen the reaction of his listeners. What do you suppose they thought of these words? "This Jesus is supposed to be such a wise teacher, but he thinks a person is blessed to be poor, or hungry, or weeping, or hated by others! What is he talking about?" And indeed, believers have struggled with these words ever since.

Matthew's version of this message stops here. But Luke's version continues, and we learn that there is more to what Jesus is saying than a description of God's blessing. Jesus goes on to say: *Woe to you if you are full, or rich, or laughing, or popular.* Here we see that this passage isn't just simply about a God who cares about us when we are down and out. It is more than that. Jesus draws a sharp contrast between those who are poor and unfortunate and those who are rich and fortunate. He describes the former as being blessed, and the latter as being cursed.

Much to my regret, in this troubling collection of blessings and woes, Jesus doesn't call us to action. He doesn't give us a roadmap for what it means to be faithful. He doesn't give us a five-point program for evaluating the effectiveness of our congregation, much as we might like one. Instead, Jesus teaches us about God, and what he teaches about God is this: God is one whose very nature is to want to bless us – to make a difference in our lives when we need it most. And so when someone is poor, God grants the gifts of the kingdom. When someone is weeping, God leads them down the journey towards laughter. When someone is persecuted because of their faith, God gives the same sense of fulfillment that the prophets of old received.

FIRST LESSON

JEREMIAH 17:5-10

PSALM

PSALM 1

SECOND LESSON

1<sup>ST</sup> CORINTHIANS  
15:12-20

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 6:17-26

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**LORD GOD, MERCIFULLY  
RECEIVE THE PRAYERS  
OF YOUR PEOPLE. HELP  
US TO SEE AND  
UNDERSTAND THE  
THINGS WE OUGHT TO  
DO, AND GIVE US GRACE  
AND POWER TO DO  
THEM; THROUGH YOUR  
SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR  
LORD. AMEN.**

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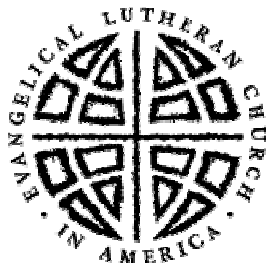
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But there is a shadow side to everything that is good, and you will find no exception here. God's nature is to bless us, so if we are already rich, if we are already full, if we are already laughing, if we are already popular, then woe to us. Woe to us when life is so good that there is little God can add to it. Woe to us when life is so full, so busy, so enjoyable, that there is no room for anything else.

This text teaches us about God, and by implication it also teaches us about ourselves. If it is in God's nature to bless us, then it is in our nature to be touched by God's blessing. The problem is: we live in a world where people are so full – a world in which *we* are so full. And as well off as we are, there often isn't any room left to be blessed by God.

A friend of mine has a ministry with young people. At an over-night event, they served Crispy Cream donuts for breakfast. He watched while one High School boy devoured three huge donuts. As he was reaching for number four, my friend asked him: "Let's say you took that fourth donut, and ate it. And just as you were finishing, someone came up and offered to take you out for the nicest breakfast you've ever had: omelets and pancakes and bacon and hash browns and fresh fruit. What would you say?" The young boy insightfully answered: "I'd have to say that I was too full."

Sometimes it seems as though we live in a world where we are just too full.

Yet when we live with a deeper awareness of life, it becomes apparent that even amidst the fullness, we find shadows of want and need that God seeks to touch. In times of loss, in times of uncertainty, in times of fear, in times of confusion... in those times, when we find ourselves in need, that is when God most desires to bless us. What does it mean to be blessed by God? It means to have our emptiness filled by God's presence. It means to have our lack overcome by God's abundance. It means to have our fear turned into God's hope.

So how does one come to experience the blessing of God? Especially those of us who live lives so full, that it becomes difficult for us to receive anything from our God? In my desire for action sermons, I find myself wanting to conclude this sermon with a suggestion as to what we can all do about this. I want to offer you five easy steps to become blessed by God. But Jesus doesn't provide that for us today. He describes those who are blessed and those who are not, but doesn't give us a way to move from one group to the other.

How does one come to experience the blessing of God? The best answer, of course, is the classic Lutheran answer: there is nothing we can do. Luther was right about that. We can't influence who and when God will forgive; we can't influence who and when God will bless. We simply receive it as a gift. The truth is, this morning's Gospel lesson doesn't call us to move ourselves from one group to another because, of course, we're not in one group or another. There are those times when we are so full, so preoccupied with ourselves, that we leave God no room to bless us. Woe to us in those times, because we keep at arm's length the relationship God wants to have with us. But there are also those times when in our brokenness and pain, God comes to us, blessing us, healing us, and renewing us.

If we hear these words and find ourselves desperate to do something, let me offer this suggestion: Lent is coming. This season of considering our sinfulness, this season of considering our rebellion from God. Some have described it as a dark season, a depressing season, and many church leaders have suggested that we ought to do away with it all together. I disagree with them, in part based on this morning's text. What Lent is intended to provide for us is a deeper awareness of our personal sinfulness – not to make us feel badly about ourselves, but to heighten our sense of how richly God blesses us when we are completely forgiven. Lent may be just the right season for us to consider this morning's text, just the right season for us to realize how deep our need is, just the right season to experience what it means to be blessed by God.

Despite my aching desire to give you something to do, perhaps it is enough, today, to remember that God is one who wants to meet our needs, who wants to bless us and heal us. And the more aware we are of our own need for God, the more aware we will be of how fortunate we are to be blessed by God..

Take a minute and think of one way that you have been blessed by God – one time when you found yourself in a particular moment of need, and God was there for you. [*Provide 30 seconds to a minute, for people to reflect.*] Now turn to a neighbor, and share your story. [*Provide a minute or two to share a blessing story with a neighbor.*]

Will you pray with me? God, thank you for caring so much about us, and for reaching out to us with blessings when we find ourselves in times of need. Help us to be aware of our deepest times of need, aware of your generous desire to bless us, and aware of how grateful we ought to be. Thank you for your love and your grace in our lives. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (February 11, 2007)

English Text: <sup>i</sup>

<sup>17</sup> He came down with them 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. <sup>18</sup> They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup> And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

<sup>20</sup> Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. <sup>21</sup> Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. <sup>22</sup> Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." <sup>ii</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>17</sup> Καὶ καταβὰς μετ' αὐτῶν ἔστη ἐπὶ τόπου πεδινοῦ, καὶ ὄχλος πολὺς μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ, καὶ πλῆθος πολὺ τοῦ λαοῦ ἀπὸ πάσης τῆς Ἰουδαίας καὶ Ἰερουσαλὴμ καὶ τῆς παραλίου Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος, <sup>18</sup> οἱ ἦλθον ἀκοῦσαι αὐτοῦ καὶ ἰαθῆναι ἀπὸ τῶν νόσων αὐτῶν· καὶ οἱ ἐνοχλούμενοι ἀπὸ πνευμάτων ἀκαθάρτων ἐθεραπεύοντο, <sup>19</sup> καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἐζήτησεν ἀπτεσθαι αὐτοῦ, ὅτι δύνάμις παρ' αὐτοῦ ἐξήρχετο καὶ ἴατο πάντα. <sup>20</sup> Καὶ αὐτὸς ἐπάρας τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ εἰς τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ ἔλεγεν· Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί, ὅτι ὑμετέρα ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. <sup>21</sup> μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες νῦν, ὅτι χορτασθήσεσθε. μακάριοι οἱ κλαίοντες νῦν, ὅτι γελάσετε. <sup>22</sup> μακάριοι ἐστε ὅταν μισήσωσιν ὑμᾶς οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ ὅταν ἀφορίσωσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ ὀνειδίσωσιν καὶ ἐκβάλωσιν τὸ ὄνομα ὑμῶν ὡς πονηρὸν ἐνεκὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου· <sup>23</sup> χάρητε ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ καὶ σκιρτήσατε, ἰδοὺ γὰρ ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ· κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ γὰρ ἐποίουν τοῖς προφήταις οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν. <sup>24</sup> Πλὴν οὐαὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς πλουσίοις, ὅτι ἀπέχετε τὴν παράκλησιν ὑμῶν. <sup>25</sup> οὐαὶ ὑμῖν, οἱ ἐμπεπλησμένοι νῦν, ὅτι πεινάσετε. οὐαὶ, οἱ γελῶντες νῦν, ὅτι πενθήσετε καὶ κλαύσετε. <sup>26</sup> οὐαὶ ὅταν ὑμᾶς καλῶς εἴπωσιν πάντες οἱ ἄνθρωποι· κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ γὰρ ἐποίουν τοῖς ψευδοπροφήταις οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν. <sup>iii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/lectionary.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html).

<sup>ii</sup> St. Luke 6:17-26, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iii</sup> St. Luke 6:17-26, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).