

“AN UPSIDE DOWN PERSPECTIVE”

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Luke 6:17-26

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There are websites which can tell you where you stand in terms of world-wide wealth. According to one of these sites, there are roughly 55 million people in the world who are richer than I am. If that sounds like I'm not doing too well, consider that my ranking places me in the top 1% of the richest people in the world. There are over 7 billion people who are not as wealthy as I am. So, am I rich or am I poor? It depends on your perspective, although knowing what we know about our world, most of us would be hard pressed to believe that we are not blessed with an abundance of riches. Perspective - how we see things, the vision of reality we carry around with us, shapes us in significant ways to be the people that we are. **Our text this morning from Luke's gospel is all about perspective, but it may not be a perspective that we're very familiar with.**

We've heard the words before. ***Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.*** The words are familiar, but the context is a bit different. Luke, in the 6th chapter of his gospel, our reading for this morning, speaks of blessings and woes, the blessings being part of something we have come to call the beatitudes. Most often we associate the beatitudes with Matthew's gospel and his account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. But here in Luke's gospel Jesus' sermon is delivered a little lower on the mountain, on a level place, after having come down from the mountain with his disciples.

There is no doubt that both gospel writers are writing of the same event. How they choose to describe that event speaks more to the focus of each of the gospels than to any charge, disharmony or contradiction between the gospel writers. One commentator has called Luke's gospel, ***“the gospel of the little people.”*** Luke's gospel is the one that focuses the most on the plight of the poor and it is the gospel which records most strongly the role of women in Jesus' ministry. **And so maybe it might make sense for Luke to position Jesus on the level place, a little down from the slopes of the mountain, at one with the poor, the women and with all those who were considered the little people of society.**¹

Though the location may vary by a few hundred meters, the message is, however, the same. **And the message is good news for the little people, those who are poor, those who are hungry, good news for those who are sad and in mourning, those who are persecuted for Jesus' sake.** Now before we continue, some of us are going to be stuck, not on the fact that the message of Jesus is good news for the little people, but that Jesus seems to go on to say that if we're not little people, we're somehow doomed.

Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when people speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets. Some of us are wondering, does Jesus have it in for us who happen to be rich, who happen to be not hungry, who happen to be just happy or

¹ Sarah Dylan, *Sarah's Lectionary Blog*.

who happen to have the respect of others? Does Jesus have it in for the vast majority of us sitting here or watching this morning? ***And the answer is no.***

The woes that Luke records from Jesus' sermon are not to be understood without the proper context. They do not stand alone. The woes are used as a rhetorical device, standing as a contrast to the blessings Jesus speaks of earlier. Eugene Peterson in his *Message* translation records our text in this manner. ***"It's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get. And its trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And its trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it. There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests – look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors. Your task is to be true, not popular."*** Jesus doesn't have it in for those who aren't poor or hungry or in mourning or being persecuted. **But he would warn those whose lives have no connection to the truth of poverty, hunger, mourning or persecution in our world.**

It's interesting that as we look at our text, we find no place where Jesus tells us to do some-thing or be some-way. **Jesus doesn't say** to the people who are gathered about him, blessed are you **when you choose** to be poor or blessed are you **who desire** to be hungry. Jesus doesn't say blessed are you for **deliberately going out of your way** to be hated by people and rejected by them. **Rather than an imperative command, instead of telling us what to do, Jesus' sermon states a reality, this is how things are.** But what kind of reality is Jesus talking about here? Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, blessed are the excluded, the rejected and the persecuted? Woe to the rich, to the well fed, to the laughing, to the well spoken of? ***This may be a statement of reality, but its no reality we're familiar with.*** So, what's Jesus speaking of here?

In the context of Luke's gospel the Sermon on the Plain comes immediately after the calling of the twelve disciples. This is the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and here in this sermon Jesus spells out what his ministry would be about. **As Jesus relates it, his ministry is not about telling us how things ought to be or what we ought to be doing. His ministry is about telling us how things will be and inviting us to consider where we will fit in this upside down reality.** These beatitudes are not about telling us to change in this or that way, nor are they about telling us what the world around us looks like. **These beatitudes speak of what God's reality looks like and what matters to God. Jesus doesn't directly tell us what we should be doing, but by stating what his reality will be he invites us to consider, and consider very carefully, whether we will find ourselves as the blessed ones or the ones filled with woe in the upside down reality Jesus promises will be the truth of his kingdom.**

Perspective - point of view. We live with an image of the world as we think it is, even as we think it should be. But both of these images suffer from the same problem. **Whether it is the world as we think it is or the world as we think it should be, both images rely on our human assumptions of inherent value and worth.** We think the world values the rich, the powerful, the secure and the strong. We know the world is divided between those who are rich, those who are powerful, those who are secure and strong and those who aren't rich, powerful or strong. And we know that its not right that some are winners and some are losers. We think the world ought to be such a place that all would have enough. The world should be a place where there are no losers.

But what if the world God has in mind is a place where there is an inherent value in being poor, in being powerless, in being vulnerable and in being weak, what if there is an inherent worth in being on the losing end, not because they are conditions to be fixed, but just because God loves such people? Wouldn't that turn our perspective upside down? God doesn't say blessed are the poor who are made wealthy or blessed

are the hungry who find food. God doesn't say blessed are the weeping when they find the strength to control their emotions or blessed are the persecuted when they find acceptance from others. **The blessedness Jesus speaks of isn't predicated on the fixing of our conditions.**

Rejoice, says Jesus, if these conditions are true of you, not because God will make you richer, or make you more powerful, more secure or stronger, rejoice, not because God will make you a winner, **but because God loves you and great will be your reward in heaven.** I can't imagine that the reward in heaven Jesus speaks of is merely receiving the opposite of what our human understanding of poor, hungry, mourning, and persecuted might be. *I can't imagine God's reality being so limited.*

Here's the problem. We know that the world is divided between the haves and the have-nots. The solution to this problem, as the world would have us believe, is to fix the situation of the have-nots so that they too can be part of the haves. **But that's not what Jesus teaches. That's not supposed to be our perspective.** We think that in order for the poor to be blessed they have to be rich, or at least not so poor, in order for the hungry to be blessed they have to be well fed. We think that in order for the weeping to be blessed they have to steel themselves from vulnerability and in order for the persecuted to be blessed they have to be accepted and be well spoken of. That's our perspective. **But God wants to turn our perspective upside down, on its head.**

You see, in God's upside down reality there is an inherent value in being poor, because our poverty, whether in spirit or in body, can only be truly rectified by the wealth of God's presence and love in our lives.

There is an inherent value in our being hungry, not so that we can be well fed, but because it is only in our hunger that we truly acknowledge our need for the bread of life and the living water which never dries up.

There is an inherent worth to our weeping, because true grief and true mourning are only comforted and healed by the touch of God, God's mercy and God's grace, not merely by shielding ourselves from the vulnerabilities of life.

There is an inherent worth to being persecuted, because only from the perspective of true persecution do we begin to understand the salvation God offers, salvation not only from the ups and downs of this existence, but from the power of sin, evil and death for all eternity.

The confession of our weakness, the acknowledgment of our losing allows God to strengthen us, reign in us and sustain us. **What is it to be blessed? It depends on our perspective.**

I struggle with the gospel when it confronts my perspective of how things should be. I find it challenging to hear that there is inherent value to being poor or hungry, in weeping or in being persecuted. Are we supposed to acknowledge the poverty and inequality in our midst and just look the other way? Are we to see suffering and oppression and pretend that it's just not happening? I think not and Jesus begins his ministry by announcing good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Last week we heard about the ministry of Presbyterian World Service and Development. We are to engage in alleviating suffering, in making the world a place where the dignity of each person created in God's image is upheld and valued.

But our text goes deeper. **We might struggle to hear what Jesus says this morning and how he says it. But from the perspective of people who have little or nothing, it makes perfect sense.** From the perspective of those billions of people for whom the vacillations of the stock market or housing prices makes no real impact,

for the countless numbers for whom suffering, weeping and persecution is the reality of daily living, what Jesus says makes perfect sense. **The gospel is gospel to them right now.** They're not waiting until they are wealthy or full, not waiting until they are freed from suffering or persecution to know that they are blessed by God. They know that God's blessing is inherent in who they are, in the reality that they are God's people, those to whom Jesus has proclaimed the Lord's favour. When you're a poor night shift worker living on the outskirts of Tijuana struggling to make ends meet for your family or a young man living in an extended family in Malawi wondering whether the corn in your storage bin will last you until the next harvest or whether you will go hungry again, the gospel isn't about living your best life now or knowing prosperity, **it is the proclamation that Jesus declares you blessed, just because you are, just because he says so. There's a deep truth to that which is hard for us to hear because we have so much insulation from this simple dependence.**

But there is still good news for us, for us who are rich and full and laughing and well-spoken of now. As Eugene Peterson's translation made it clear, we may not be able to change the reality of how things are for people, at least not now, **but if our lives have no connection to the truth of poverty, hunger, mourning or persecution in our world, then truly we will know the woes that Jesus speaks of.**

The comedian Lilly Tomlin once said something to the effect that winning the rat race, more than anything, **only confirms that we're rats.** We have wealth, we have health, we have security and we have all the accoutrements of a successful life, but in the quiet moments, in the moments when we're all alone, apart from all the noise of the world, we know in deep down in our bones, we know in our hearts, we know in our spirits, that there's got to be something more. Yes, we are to work diligently with the gifts God has given us. Yes, we are to reach out to help those who are in need, those who are poor and hungry, weeping and persecuted. **But we realize in these brief glimpses that blessedness does not come from fat wallets or full bellies, impenetrable emotions or security from persecution. Blessedness comes from the riches of God's love, the hunger and thirst for God's presence, the healing of God's peace and the promise of God's salvation.**

My friends, our perspective allows us to be the people we are. Jesus invites us to a new perspective, a different value system, one that turns the world upside down. It's not the way the world is, **but it's the way the world will be.** It's not the way perhaps we are, **but it's the way we can be.** May our loving and merciful God, change our point of view. May God change how we value and find worth in life. **May Jesus change his people, his church, that we may see with his eyes and live for the things that matter to him.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.