

[Luke 6:17-26](#)

Just before this morning's gospel opens, Jesus spent a night praying in the mountains alone, and then calling his disciples to him, specially designating 12 of them as apostles.

Afterwards, as we heard, "Jesus came down with the twelve apostles 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." It sounds like the plain was a place where anyone from anywhere who could get close enough to Jesus could get healed.

It was there, in the midst of this healing megathon, that Jesus gave a demanding and profound teaching to his disciples. It takes the form of four pairs of statements:

"Blessed are you who are poor, But woe to you who are rich,  
"Blessed are you who are hungry now, Woe to you who are full now,  
"Blessed are you who weep now, Woe to you who are laughing now,  
"Blessed are you when people hate you, Woe to you when all speak well of you.

This challenges some of our basic ideas about how God works. For example, when someone comments on how St. Benedict's has grown these past ten years I tend to reply, "Yes, God has blessed us."

Which is certainly true – I think we'd all agree that God has blessed

us greatly. But what if we hadn't grown? What would we say then? Would it be a sign that God was NOT blessing us?

Most of us look at practitioners of the so-called Prosperity Gospel with a jaded eye. We don't think that God wants to make us wealthy and successful and that that will happen if we follow Jesus and put money in the plate. But I suspect that most of us continue to feel on some level that if we're doing things right, walking our talk and deepening our spiritual life that God's blessing will follow in the form of things going at least a little easier. When things go surprisingly well aren't we likely to praise God for God's blessing or even, in the dark recesses of our minds whisper "somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good"? But when things are not so good then we ask "What am I meant to be learning?" as if by identifying and learning the right lesson we can restore ourselves to God's blessing cycle.

In this sermon on the plain, Jesus throws all that up in the air. "Blessed are the poor: for yours is the kingdom of God." The word Jesus uses for poor here does not mean the nice clean hardworking deserving poor, but the beggars, the pan-handlers, the drunks and meth-heads, those who are incarcerated and those whose lives are wasted by poverty and urban blight. Blessed are the undeserving poor for the kingdom of God **is** yours. Notice the tense here. Not will be at some point in the future but **is** right now.

This is especially challenging to us, Jesus' 21<sup>st</sup> century north American followers, because in the great scheme of things we are the ones who are rich, we are the ones who are full, we are the ones

who love to laugh, and care that others think well of us. We are the white, the educated, the privileged. So we are not it seems the ones Jesus calls blessed.

But not so fast.

Perhaps part of what Jesus is saying is that nothing remains the same. That those who are hungry will be full and those who are full will be hungry. Those who grieve today will laugh again and those who laugh and celebrate will mourn in the future. Perhaps there is no difference between God's blessing for those who today are beggars and those who throw them money. Perhaps the difference is in our minds, not in God's heart.

The reading tells us that after Jesus came down from the mountain with his disciples and stood in the plain, he looked **up** at his disciples and began to teach them. It makes practical sense that he sat down to teach – that was the custom. But I wonder if there's something else going on.

Everyone else, people from all areas and walks of life were on the same level, gathered on the plain with no distinction of social, ethnic or religious status. I wonder if Luke is subtly suggesting that the disciples were being a bit smug, thinking they were a little higher up, one better than the “great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.” After all, they **were** Jesus' disciples. But Jesus tells them that the ones to whom the kingdom of God belongs are the beggars, the outcast and overlooked.

That is not the reign of God that they were expecting.

So let's take a closer look at the difference in the minds of the panhandler and the one who gives them money. The panhandler knows they need and want something and they are not too proud to ask for it. They have reached a point of desperation where they can no longer manage in their own power. I know that what they want may be drugs rather than food, and we can make all sorts of judgements about that, but the reality is that they have reached a place where they are no longer relying on their own ability to support themselves but are asking for the help of strangers. This is rarely a choice they made easily.

Those of us who do not need to beg tend to believe that we can make it okay ourselves. Yes we may rely on friends and family for support but we are ultimately our own selves. We already have. We already have so much. And that gets in the way of our relying entirely on God. It gets in the way of our knowing and remembering that we are entirely dependent upon God who is the ground of our being. It is easy for us to be proud and think that we can do things in our own strength, that we can make all the big decisions on our own. We are so full of all that we are and have that there's very little room for God to get in, and we may not even be really looking for God because we pretty much have it made, thank you.

But Jesus reminds us again and again that the truth of the spiritual life is that we have to let go of all we think we know, and all we think we are, in order to truly live the life of the Spirit. Remember, he said "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little

children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 18:3) and even more radically, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” (John 3:3)

Or as they put it in 12 steps,

We admitted we were powerless over our addiction - that our lives had become unmanageable. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

It is only when we are willing to acknowledge our need that we will turn to God with the hope of a pan-handler and surrender our lives into the life of the One who is so much greater.

And when we do that, we discover that far from having lost our identity, far from having lost our freedom, we have gained it. For we were made to live and move and have our being in Christ. There is no great blessing in being full with the things of this world because they get in the way of being full with God and recognizing that God blesses us in all the ups and downs of life. Even when everything falls apart, God is still with us blessing us and caring for us.

God’s eye is on the sparrow. But even more so, God’s eye is on the meth head and the immigrant, the homeless person who leaves trash along the street, the misfits of every kind. And where God is, God’s people should be too. Thanks to each one of you who ministers at the warming shelter, laundry love, the Abundance shop, community dinners, 40Prado and wherever God’s blessed people are. It gives us

an opportunity to share the blessing that is on the poor – the very kingdom of God.