

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If we have been unclear up to this point as to what exactly the message of Jesus was and is, we hope (and pray) to grasp it clearly today. But, if you are like me, it is easy to become uncomfortable with the dueling statements of blessings and curses from Jesus heard in the gospel reading for today.

What on earth was Jesus talking about here? Blessed are the poor? Happy are the hungry? Fortunate are the tearful? I never heard anybody say, "Isn't this great, I am starving!" I have never seen a person sobbing their heart out with a smile of joy on their face. Have you?

It makes me uneasy the way Jesus speaks about rich, easy-going folk who enjoy a good time and are well respected in the eyes of almost everybody. On a worldwide scale, the United States is a rich place. This nation is way, way, way up there in terms of Gross National Product, income, life expectancy, health care, educational opportunity, and military might...all on a comparative scale with other nations.

In terms of what this world calls rich, if we live in the United States, we are the number one spot. Again, that is the measurement of richness as defined by the world. And I, personally, am a living example of that...a professional by education and career for over forty years, living in a 4,000 square foot home, possessing treasures and collectibles that no one else has. Am I bragging? No...but instead I point the finger of Jesus at myself, and say, "Woe is me!" And I am not alone here, right?

Again, what on earth is Jesus talking about here...particularly to get you and me all agitated?

Jesus preached the Kingdom of God. He did NOT preach justification by faith...not that he might have disagreed with that, but that was Paul's message. Neither did he preach salvation in His name: that was Peter's turn of phrase. His own message was simple: the Kingdom of God is at hand.

The words we hear in today's gospel reading from Luke are among the most well known words Jesus ever spoke. These scriptures probably sound more familiar in Matthew's gospel as Jesus there gives what we call the Beatitudes. Blessed are the...

However, Matthew's are different because they are more spiritual in nature. In Matthew's gospel we hear, 'Blessed are the poor in Spirit'...which is equally as confusing on the surface. If we think about it, we wonder...as it is never quite certain what it means to have "poverty of spirit".

Luke records a different set of beatitudes, given through the preaching of Jesus, actual words from his lips. Luke is not changing the words of Jesus. These are two different sermons, one on the Mount in Matthew and another on the Plain, the level place of Luke Chapter 6, verse 17. Similarities appear because they are delivered by the same person.

This sermon from Luke, however, is more direct. It is inside out and upside down...just like the focus of his ministry. Notice that, in this instance, Jesus is focusing not simply on any group of poor

persons, but rather specifically on those persons who are poor and reviled because they are disciples. It is made abundantly clear in the fourth and final bracket of blessings and curses: 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 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.'

We need to see these sayings in context, as part of Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God. In the world around us...the world of being impressed by power politics, personal wealth, fancy possessions... nice guys finish last, and that you need to 'do unto others before they do it to you'. But in the Kingdom of God as envisioned by Jesus, everything is in reverse.

The preaching of the Kingdom of God was the announcement from Jesus that a new world was dawning, a world of true justice and real and lasting peace. The old world is passing away, and God's world is beginning, a world that is the way it always should have been. A world where 'each man sits peaceably under his own fig tree' as Micah saw it. A world where, in the vision of Amos, 'the ploughman would overtake the reaper'. A world where there will be no more crying or pain, where the lion and the lamb will lay down side by side, where people will beat their swords into plough shears and will study war no more, where the earth would be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Luke's emphasis in his gospel is on the here and now. That the Kingdom of God is with us right now...and NOT when we are dead and buried. Not later, but now. For example, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." And the anchors of instead concentrating on the world are a serious detriment to entering the Kingdom of God.

Remember the rich young ruler in Luke's Chapter 18? He tells Jesus that he is a devout follower of the laws of Moses, but finds that he cannot...not will not, but cannot let go of his riches, so he cannot become a follower of Jesus into the Kingdom of God.

Indeed, the expectation here is that the disciples are poor. Some of the disciples may have been poor when they met Jesus, but most of them became poor through meeting Jesus. 'They threw away their nets', it is said of Peter and James and John. They threw away their only means of livelihood, and followed Jesus. Levi leaves his tax office with the money still on the counter. Zacchaeus declares 'half my goods I give to the poor' when he comes to Jesus.

Often, the poor sense their need of God, their dependency upon God more than others. They have no sense of security. If people have their own security apart from God, their tendency is to have no need for the "good news" Jesus preaches to the poor. Not that the richer do not find their security in God, but it is more difficult and more unlikely due to a false sense of comfort. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The heart naturally follows the treasure, so treasure in heaven means a heart fixed on heaven, while treasure on earth equally means a heart fixed on earth.

And, we are all comparatively rich. So, why bother...right? What is the big deal about the

Kingdom of God? “Repent and believe”, Jesus says. “Repent and believe”....for what?

Last Sunday, I told you part of my own gospel story...but just the beginning. How I worked the bait shop on Black Lake, counting nightcrawlers while listening to the Senate Watergate hearings on the radio. Well, going further, I was always drawn to church...often went alone as a child. But I was passionate about politics and the news of the day. A political science major in college, I spent a semester in Washington at the height of those turbulent Watergate times, and I loved being first hand in the swirl of it all. As I grew older and became married, I remember how troubled I was, in talking with my surviving grandmother, about the anxiety of bringing children into a Cold War world of superpower conflict. I studied and worked hard. Stumbled here and there in my life, and suffered lost relationships.

I also became sick. Developed stage-4 cancer at 40 years old, told by the experts at Sloan-Kettering in Manhattan that I had a 40% chance, at best, to survive. Had a heart attack at 50, and told that it was my second...don't know how I missed the first. Then the H1N1 virus, leading to discitis...a disease the doctors said they had not seen since their textbooks in med school...and treating with opiates for over two years. And finally, stage 4 kidney failure...staring kidney dialysis and kidney transplant straight in the face with only 20-some percent kidney function...while trying to maintain a full time ministry among the poor and the lost in the courts, and serving two churches. How?

“Enter the Kingdom of God”, Jesus says. “Repent and believe”. It worked for him. Why not?

Our readings on this day, the hymns, even the name of the prelude played by Erick...all point to this theme of letting go. To repent and believe.

So, I repented. Changed direction. Not once, but whenever it is necessary. Saying, praying: “God, make me the person you want me to be. Help me to be who I should be.” And so my journey began and continues, and the Peace of God continues to find me.

Do not get me wrong: I do lament the absolutely tragic state of absent leadership in our national and state government, and pray earnestly for God's help. But, for some reason beyond my understanding, I am no longer panicked by the daily news, seeing it as only temporal. I am gradually increasing my faith in God's care for my needs. When Suzanne, my late wife passed, it was surprisingly very calming to me. I was and am thankful that her suffering had ended, and I was held up in peace. When Meribeth and I were re-united after so many years, I knew a joy from God that I had never known before.

Finally, my personal physical health is restored, outside of the control or the knowledge of the doctors. I am cancer free for over 25 years. My cardiologists could not be happier. I only take Tylenol now for minor discomfort. And my kidney function, inexplicably, has reversed. The numbers, to their surprise and shock, are improving...moving away from dialysis and transplant. I am no longer anemic but consistently reading normal blood levels. The medical people have no explanation for any of it.

Why tell you this? Because, by the grace of God, I believe that I have one foot in this world...and the other in the Kingdom of God. When you hear the preacher lingo of “being saved”, and

“being reborn”, and “being free from sin”, I believe it is a matter of being resident in the Kingdom of God. Of taking the risk. Of trying it out. Of saying to God, silently or aloud, “Help me”.

I will never forget what I recognize was a transformative event: The client’s name was Florence. Before I started representing her, her children had already been removed from her because of a combination of her excessive drug abuse and her defiance in the face of court orders.

She was hysterical. Crying. Despondent. Leaning against my office wall, wailing.

And, all of the sudden, I did not see her as a crack whore. I saw her as suffering, lost, and my heart went out to her...allowing me to speak the right words in the right tones for her to hear.

I did not do anything. I just no longer saw her as I had before. Now, “with eyes that see and ears that hear”, I was able to see her for who she was. A person who loves her children and was suffering in how to do it.

Florence, over time, with trust having been restored, turned her life around. She thrived and the children were eventually returned. I see her at court, every year or so, when she is supporting someone else there in turmoil, and she always gives me a huge smile and a warm hug.

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We had a baptism (in Zion) last Sunday. Even though our Book of Common Prayer is littered with references here and there in other passages of our liturgies, it is spot-on at Page 308 for the prayer of chrism. And I get very emotional at that point, holding a precious infant, and praying through my tears...

(Page 308, top of the page)

I pray that prayer to God for each and every one of you, just as I am convinced that Jesus prayed that for each one of his disciples. That in his deep love, he prayed that they...we...rich or poor, would allow God to help us to enter God’s Kingdom. To enter it now...and really enjoy the life that God blesses us with, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

