

Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Luke 6:17-26

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
February 17, 2019

## **Blessings and Woes**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

In our Old Testament Lesson for this Sixth Sunday after Epiphany we find a short collection of wisdom sayings. Those who turn away from the Lord are contrasted with those who trust in the Lord. The Lord tests our inner motives. Listen to these words from Jeremiah 17:5-10...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson today from the sixth chapter of Luke we hear Jesus begin his Sermon on the Plain, so called because of its location on a flat place and because of a good bit of shared content with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Blessings are paired with woes. Listen to these words from Luke 6:17-26...

### *Sermon*

In the scripture just prior to our Gospel Lesson today (6:12-16), we read that Jesus went out to a mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. When day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve to form his inner circle. These twelve are differentiated from the throngs of disciples by naming them apostles. There's Peter and Andrew, James and John, Phillip and Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Jesus descends the mountain with his newly named apostles to a great crowd who have come from the regions of Jerusalem, Judea, Tyre, and Sidon. In fact, this gathering makes up a large portion of the populations of those regions. This crowd includes both the blessed and the

cursed, the rich and the poor. Jesus himself had come from a poor family, though Jesus supporters will include those who are wealthy.

This throng of humanity has come to hear Jesus and to be healed of their diseases. And Jesus does heal them all, healing first and then teaching. Power came out of him. As it did when the woman in Mark 5 with an issue of blood, quietly managed to make her way through the crowd and just touch the hem of his garment and find healing. Likewise, here in Luke 6, power comes out of Jesus as all the crowd sought to touch him. No doubt for some in the crowd Jesus was a sort of lucky charm, or a magician. They only sought a healing touch or a chance to see extraordinary events, but not a new life.

Here in this Sermon on the Plain Jesus speaks to humble folk from Tyre and sun-darkened fishermen from Sidon, to widows and waifs from Jerusalem, to crippled and diseased beggars from all of Judea. Jesus speaks *to* them, *of* them, and *for* them.

First we hear of blessings, and then carefully paired woes: “Blessed are you who are poor...” is paired with “Woe to you who are rich...” “Blessed are you who are hungry now...” is paired with “Woe to you who are full now...” “Blessed are you who weep now...” is paired with “Woe to you who are laughing now...”

Jesus proclaims that a reversal is coming. Not just in heaven, but in the kingdom that he has inaugurated. As the old spiritual song says, “Trouble don’t last always.” Those who are hungry will be filled; those who weep will laugh. Jesus calls the downtrodden to endure, for better times lie ahead.

For the most part, those listening to the Sermon on the Plain are poor people, living under Roman occupation. The teaching is that it is better to be poor, hungry, weeping, and hated now,

than to be rich and just neglect the poor; to be full and not share of your abundance; to be full of laughter and disregard those in misery.

Robert Dannals says that he has long been fascinated and repelled by ants. He tells the story of once watching on the Discovery Channel a program about ants.

My screen was swarming with ants: endlessly foraging for food, darting single file along invisible trails, scrambling over bridges made of grass blades and twigs.

But not all the ants were so active. Somewhere deep within the ant hill was a chamber filled with what are known as the cows. The chamber looked like a hanger of tiny blimps, for the cow ants clinging to its walls had enormous bellies swollen with the ant hill's surplus food. They were filled to overflowing, condemned to being endlessly stuffed, eternally immobilized by the very weight of their awesome fullness. I kept wondering if they were at least dimly aware that, for them, this is all there is, has ever been, and ever will be. The cow ants never see daylight; they never know anything except getting full, the kind of fullness that is actually empty.

Jesus spoke about fullness as he stood on a level place somewhere in Galilee, surrounded by a great multitude. He started by preaching about the fullness that is empty—and also the richness that is real poverty, the laughter that might as well be weeping, and the power and prestige that ultimately are weak and inadequate.

We are not readily apt to favor meekness and hunger and poverty. We want to look out for ourselves. But Jesus' mission is to be a light, not just to a privileged inner circle but to the whole world, requiring that those who embrace his mission will prioritize those outside the circle of privilege.

The scriptures proclaim that the things with which we fill up our lives often leave us empty, but God will fill the truly empty with that which sustains. Are you going to be eternally full in God's kingdom, Jesus asked, or are you going to be full and satisfied in this world? If you hoard the world's goods, then you are going to swell up like a cow ant, and you will have already received all you're going to get for your efforts. There is a better way.

On February 3, 1943, on a bitterly cold night, the U.S. transport ship *Dorchester*, the ship carrying a thousand troops to battle in World War II, was struck by a torpedo and sank. Four Army chaplains—two Protestants, a Jewish rabbi, and a Roman Catholic priest—worked to distribute life jackets, calm the men, and help them into the lifeboats. There were not enough life jackets or lifeboats to go around, so the chaplains took none for themselves. They gave away everything they had and then joined hands and prayed together as the ship sank.

These men did something absurd by the world's standards, but they lived the reality of Jesus' teachings. They gave us a living parable of how to shine Jesus' light into world, entering into the fullness of God's kingdom with hands and hearts wide open—empty, but full.

Yes, people may be prone to just look out for themselves. As Jeremiah reminds us, “The heart is deceitful above all things.” It is easy to fall into the routine of forgetting and forsaking God's word. But nonetheless, we can still choose God's way. And concern for the poor, the imprisoned, the sick, and the oppressed is part of the agenda for followers of Jesus.

One way that we reflect Jesus teachings is that we support ministries like Good Neighbor Cupboard and Clean Start. We who may have never known hunger, or poverty, reach out to those who presently do. I recall in my interim pastorate at the Limestone Church in Gaffney, how several members were actively engaged with Habitat for Humanity. At the Greenville Main Library I've observed tutors teaching English to adults. And of course, here at Midway, a number of our members dedicate time and energy with Meals on Wheels. These people go beyond giving financial support, to providing personal, practical, physical support.

Finally, we note that the blessings and woes in the Sermon on the Plain are in the second person (you). “Blessed are you who weep now.” Each listener and each of us today can hear Jesus' words in our own individual circumstances each in our own time and place. Surely all

who are shut-ins or care for a shut-in can hear an encouraging word. Surely all who live from paycheck to paycheck, or from a monthly Social Security Retirement Income or Disability Income, can hear an encouraging word. Surely all who are sick or suffering, or walking through the valley of the shadow of death can hear an encouraging word.

The One who spoke such startling words in the Sermon on the Plain, words of Blessings and Woes, still speaks to us today. He speaks to those of us who are rich, to those of us who are poor, and to those of us who are just middle class. May we have ears to hear what he says to us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.