Jesus Teaches and Heals
Luke 6:17-26
Epiphany 6, Year C February 16, 2025
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Good morning, friends. We're happy to have you with us this morning. Today, we move into Luke 6 to see Jesus teaching and healing on a level plain. His message will sound very familiar, since it is similar to the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew, chapters 5—7. Although we are not going to do a comparative study of the two sermons, we will point out some examples of how the two are alike and different. The main point of today's sermon is to help us become aware of how we are to live as Jesus' disciples in the kingdom of God. Much of what we'll hear is hard to listen to and hard to preach. We'd all likely prefer a Messiah who takes good care of us, but who makes few demands upon our lives. Jesus does take good care of us, but he also makes many demands on the life of each of his disciples.

We begin in Luke 6:17-19, where we find the setting for Jesus' interactions with "a great multitude of people" (6:17). We first read that he "came down with them and stood on a level place" (6:17). The wording implies that Jesus had been somewhere higher. We learn in 6:12 that he had gone "to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God." Luke often refers to Jesus in prayer. In the morning, he called the twelve apostles (listed in 6:14-16), who would be the ones that he would eventually send out to minister in his name.

In chapter 6, verse 17, we learn that "a great crowd of his disciples" is present. How many disciples does Jesus really have? What's the difference between, a disciple and an apostle? Anyone who chooses to follow Jesus is a disciple, a learner. The Twelve, however, have been called to be Jesus' closest associates and they will eventually be sent out as apostles to heal, cast out demons, and teach. The word "apostle" means "messenger" or "sent out."

Notice that the people came from all around "to hear [Jesus] and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirit were cured" (6:18). This section concludes by telling us that Jesus healed "all of them" (6:19). We can easily surmise that Jesus quickly became widely known. Judea and Jerusalem were, of course, Jewish lands. Tyre and Sidon, however, included many Gentile residents. So, among the crowd there would have been people of various backgrounds. They did come to Jesus for different reasons, though. The "crowds" apparently came

to be healed of their illnesses and have their demons exorcised. In contrast, those who considered themselves disciples, the ones who wanted to follow the way of Jesus, came to hear him teach. So too did the apostles, for in due time they would be sent out to carry the good news of Jesus. And we too are overhearing what Jesus had to say and learning what it means to live as a disciple. We too are sent out with the gospel message.

Now that we have seen what Jesus was doing and who was present, it's time to turn our attention to what he taught the people. Right away we see several differences between Luke's account and Matthew's report. For one thing, in Luke, Jesus proposes only four blessings, as compared to Matthew's nine, which there are called beatitudes. Moreover, Luke's blessings are rooted in the conditions of people in the real world. Unlike Matthew's poor, who are primarily "poor in spirit," Luke's "poor" are people who lack resources. Similarly, the people in Matthew who hunger are spiritually hungry to hear the word of God. In Luke, however, these are the people whose stomachs are growling because they don't have enough to eat.

In Luke's Gospel, we certainly see Jesus' concern with justice for the most vulnerable members of society. These are the ones who are truly destitute. And yet, we are aware that there are many who follow him who have some resources and a even safety net. The four disciples he called first, for example—Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John—-had boats and a fishing business. We see other named followers of Jesus, such as Mary and Martha and Zacchaeus, who clearly have enough to live stable lives.

Notice in verse 20 that Jesus tells those who are poor that "yours is the kingdom of God." Recall that when Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah, as recorded in Luke 4:18-19, he was claiming that he would bring good news to the poor. And here we see that prophecy being fulfilled. What Jesus has to say is good news. This pronouncement is in the present tense. The kingdom of God belongs to the poor. We need to be careful here, though, not to glorify poverty or the hardships it brings. Jesus is simply underscoring God's commitment to the poor. They will be redeemed in God's kingdom from the oppression that they are currently experiencing.

In verse 21, we are told that the hungry will be filled. We may think of the heavenly banquet where we will feast at God's table. The future tense is also used in verse 21b, indicating that those who weep now will laugh. What we're seeing here is a great reversal. When the kingdom of God comes in all its fullness, life will be turned upside down.

The fourth and final beatitude in Luke is different in form and subject matter. It concerns how disciples can expect to be treated—hated, excluded, defiled, and defamed—because of their relationship with Jesus. Jesus knew that those who followed him would be persecuted, and so he warned them about abuse they would likely face. We know that disciples from Jesus' day into the present have been mistreated because they dared to live and preach Jesus' gospel. Anyone who is brave enough to step out and speak the truth of the gospel is liable to be persecuted, perhaps even martyred.

These four "blessings" or "beatitudes" announce God's favor. They are cause for rejoicing among the poor. In contrast, Luke includes four "woes" that will prompt the rich to shudder. Matthew does not include these woes in his Sermon on the Mount, but Luke wants to drop red flags to show the dangers of wealth. But it is not just money itself he is talking about. Jesus later tells a story about a rich farmer (12:15-21) who smugly relied on his material possessions for security. He had harvested so much that he needed to demolish the barns he had and build bigger ones to store his crops. Nice try, but God had other plans, and that very night the man died. The parable ends by saying, "so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (12:21). In a similar vein, Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) reminds us in verses 52-53 that God has brought about great reversals: the powerful are deposed, while the lowly are lifted up; the hungry are filled; and the rich are sent away empty.

The woes that Luke outlines are the opposite of the blessings. Here, the rich "have received their consolation" (6:24), which is understood to be their wealth. Those who are full now will be hungry" (6:25a), and those who laugh now will weep (6:26b). As was true with the last of the blessings, the last of the woes takes a different form. Jesus warns of a woe "when all speak well of you" (6:26). That doesn't seem right, does it? Weren't we raised to be the kind of model citizens that people would praise? So what is Jesus talking about here? He's making a comparison with how the people of old treated the false prophets. His point is that if everyone likes you, you may be one who is flattered because of your wealth or social standing, or you may support false prophets who do not speak truth but instead say what they think people want to hear.

Jesus' teachings help us to understand this contrast between blessings and woes:

> The poor and the hungry know the reality of their situation. They are totally dependent on God and therefore are disposed to entrust themselves to God's care and mercy, which is the

> foundation of grace and a right relationship with God. The rich on the other hand, are disposed to take comfort in themselves, thereby finding it more difficult to trust themselves to the mercy and grace of God. (Howard K. Gregory, "Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word,* Year C, Vol. 1, page 358.)

The essence of the difference between those who are blessed and those who experience woes may be summed up as either complete trust in God and divine grace, or self-reliance that calls upon God only when necessary.

We've come to the point in our sermon where we need to ask ourselves two questions: First, how would you describe the type of person God favors: the one who trusts God implicitly, or the one who is self-reliant and only turns to God in case of emergency? And second, which of these two best describes you?

As we mull over today's passage and the questions we've raised, it's important to note that what Jesus taught is at odds with what many societies, including our own, have taught. Throughout history, those folks who had money and success were thought to be loved and favored by God—the A-listers in the kingdom. And yet, if we take Jesus at his word, it's the people who have very little, who lack signs of what we would call success, the ones who live their lives devoted to the kingdom of God and live as God calls them to live: these are the ones who are truly blessed.

I said earlier that these words are hard to hear and hard to preach because I believe that all of us have some measure of worldly success. Okay, we're not Hollywood celebs, or sports superstars, or those with the top 1% of the money in this country. But most, if not all of us, have a home, at least one vehicle, some nice clothes, and some money socked away. Most of us have had jobs that paid us a living wage and, hopefully, provided us with some measure of enjoyment and satisfaction. And even those who are retired likely did the best they could to prepare for a time when they would live off of savings, investments, and Social Security.

If I am correct in my assessment, does this mean that we will all be consigned to the "woe" side of the kingdom ledger? I can't say for sure, but I honestly don't think so. Remember the rich farmer I spoke about earlier? I don't think he was doomed because he had resources, but rather, he was hoarding what he had instead of sharing it with anyone else. We get the same idea in the story of the rich ruler, who Jesus challenged to sell all that he had and come follow him. I honestly don't believe that Jesus calls every one of us to sell everything and live dependently on other people. But I do believe Jesus realized that this man wanted to amass money simply for

himself. As I read and understand the Bible, Jesus wants us to use our money in ways that benefit not only ourselves and loved ones but vulnerable others as well.

I've learned that principle not only from the Bible but also from John Wesley, a founder of Methodism. He was very concerned about the poor and about the way all of us handle our money. He had a famous saying: "*Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can."* These words are found in his sermon "The Use of Money." Let me spin them out a bit. As to gaining money, we are to do so with "honest industry." Wesley is clear that our gainful work is not to be done at the expense of our physical and mental health and well-bring. Nor are we to do anything that will hurt our neighbor. As to saving all we can, Wesley admonishes us not to waste our money on things that are unnecessary. We are also not to spend money on expensive clothing, furniture, or decorating accessories. Wesley's point about giving all we can is rooted in the scriptural understanding that we are not owners of anything; we are to act as stewards on God's behalf. He preaches that we are to "first provide things needful for yourself," particularly food and clothing. Then we are to provide for our spouse and children, and any other members of our family household. If there is money left, we are to provide for members of "the household of faith." If we still have money, we are to "do good unto all." We need to carefully consider how much we spend and whether we are being obedient to the word of God in doing so. (information found in Sermon 50 "Use of Money" in *The Works of John Wesley,* ed., Thomas Jackson via www.WordsOfWesley.com)

Your challenge this week is to examine your own life and consider: How are you using the resources you control so that you are able to get what you need and also have something to share with someone who lacks necessities. You may want to make a list of organizations you support. Consider how they uphold the Christian ideals and values you cherish. Estimate how much you can give to each organization, including the church, in 2025. How far are you willing to trust God? Are you willing to trust God enough to stretch yourself and give sacrificially? In addition to sharing tangible resources, I'd also challenge you to find ways to share the gospel with others in both word and deed. People need to know that God loves them!

Love, Nan