**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

**Sunday February 13, 2022**

**“Blessings and Woes” (Luke 6:17-26)**

 Our world is very confusing, complicated, and distressing. Many of us are weighed down with worry and overwhelmed with anxiety. As we walk through these difficult days, we desperately need to press pause on all the noise that floods into our lives and become more attentive to Jesus’ voice. But be forewarned, if you stop and listen to Jesus, he just might say something that will challenge you to re-evaluate your life. Such is the case with his words in this morning’s Scripture lesson from Luke’s Gospel. His words are familiar to us, but also a bit different from what we recall. This is likely because Matthew’s Gospel has a similar passage that is more well-known to us. Most of us know the eight *Beatitudes* that are found in Matthew 5:3-12, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Luke’s *Beatitudes* are similar, yet different from Matthew’s. Also, Luke’s version contains some harsh words of condemnation, which Matthew does not have. Yet both versions of the *Beatitudes* illustrate the essential quality of the Kingdom of God that turns everything on its head. Those whom Jesus designates as as *blessed* are not who the world would consider to be well-off. Similarly, those facing *hardships* are the ones who are successful and prosperous from the world’s perspective. Jesus’ words are surprising and puzzling because they confront our well-defined ideas of how the world operates and cause us to reflect on the true nature of life in God’s kingdom.

 Luke’s account of the beatitudes occurs right after Jesus’ calling of the twelve apostles. Facing an important decision, Jesus withdrew in solitude to pray to God through the night (6:12). The next morning, he chose twelve from among the larger group of disciples and designated them as *apostles* (6:13). Descending from the mountain top with the twelve, he came to a level place and was met by a huge crowd consisting of his disciples and many other people who had come from all around to see him (6:17). Seeing the many needs all around him, Jesus immediately engaged in the work of the kingdom. Since setting the oppressed free was a key element of his mission (4:18), he proceeded to release people from the bonds of disease and free them from the power of evil (6:18-19). He reached out to the sick and those tormented by evil spirits and healed them. They were the ones who were typically disregarded and shunned by society. In this way, he exemplified a vital component of the gospel mission, namely, proclaiming good news to the marginalized.

 After embodying kingdom culture through his powerful acts of healing, Jesus went on to teach about the nature of the kingdom, specifically describing the qualities of those who would inhabit the kingdom of God. His words further reinforced the upside-down nature of God’s kingdom rule. In a nutshell, Jesus declared that the poor, hungry, sorrowful, and outcast were blessed while the rich, well-fed, happy, and popular were not. It appears that the gospel really is good news for the poor!

 As Jesus began his sermon, he looked at his disciples because these words were for them; they were the ones who had to consider the consequences of participating in God’s kingdom (6:20). He began with these words, “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”* (6:20). Now Jesus was talking about folks who were poor in a tangible way, not merely “*the poor in spirit*” as Matthew puts it. Yet “the poor” were not just the economically impoverished; anyone who was marginalized from the larger society for any reason was designated as poor. It is these lowly ones whom Jesus accepts into his kingdom and the kingdom blessings are theirs, but only in a partial way for the fullness of the kingdom is yet to come.

 Jesus continued with a second beatitude, “*Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled*” (6:21) Like the first beatitude, Jesus was speaking about physical, not merely spiritual hunger. Not many people would consider the lack of the necessities of life to be a situation of blessing, which makes me wonder why Jesus thought it was. Furthermore, the hungry are not fed right away, but at some indeterminate point in the future. The hungry would be blessed if they were fed right away or by tomorrow at least. But the promise of being satisfied at some point in the future doesn’t seem to be a blessing., does it?

 In the same way his third beatitude doesn’t seem to depict a set of favorable circumstances, “*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh*” (6:21). To experience sorrow, grief, and non-stop crying is a difficult, disconcerting, and unsettling place to be. Not many people would consider themselves blessed when sad, depressed, or grief-stricken. Additionally, the prospect of the return of laughter somewhere down the road would likely not relieve the despair of the sorrowful person in the present.

 Jesus’ final beatitude continues the pattern of describing unpleasant situations as times of blessing. Here, our Lord is depicting a scenario that many of his followers have faced throughout the ages, “*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man*” (6:22). No one wants to be hated, marginalized, insulted, or slandered because of their faith in Jesus. Yet, Jesus tells us that this is an experience of blessing. In fact, Jesus advises his followers to *rejoice* and *jump for joy* when this happens because they’re in league with the truth-telling Old Testament prophets who were reviled by the people.

 Poor, hungry, sorrowful, and suffering on account of Jesus, these hardly seem to be instances of God’s blessing. In fact, they seem to be the opposite of the healthy and happy life that we all long for. On the other hand, the people whom Jesus warns of impending calamity seem to be the ones who are blessed! Rich, well-fed, cheerful, and popular, these are the kind of folks that many aspire to be. These are the ones who the world regards as successful. Yet Jesus points out that this kind of happiness is temporary and unstable. Wealth only brings short-term comfort. Hardships can swiftly come, plunging people into hunger and distress. Popularity in the public eye can easily evaporate overnight. All these things that appear to be the signs of success are ephemeral. They are here today and gone tomorrow. If this is the case, then there must be more to life than to eat, drink, and be merry!

 This is the point that Jesus is making. God’s blessings are not defined by these superficial indicators of worldly success. In fact, they transcend them. The poor, hungry, sad, and oppressed are called blessed because God’s blessing cannot be limited to external circumstances. In all four beatitudes, the suffering is tangible and external, while the blessing is spiritual. The poor are welcomed into intangible kingdom of God. The hungry will be fed at the Messiah’s banquet table at the end of the ages. God will wipe away the tears of the sorrowful in the heavenly city. Those who are oppressed on account of Jesus will experience a heavenly reward. God’s blessing is beyond the things of this world.

 While there are many valuable lessons from this passage, I’d like to focus on two implications for our lives. *First*, this passage should cause us to question our priorities and values as followers of Jesus. Admittedly, most of us want to be wealthy, well-fed, happy, and popular. Much of our time and energy is given to the pursuit of these things. Some Christians even claim that these are signs of God’s blessing. Yet Jesus warns that there’s trouble ahead for those who make these their life’s focus. Some preachers teach that God wants you to be rich. But I say to you that God wants you to be poor because in those moments of need, you realize that there is more to life than to eat, drink, and be merry. When those worldly and superficial pursuits are stripped away, we are freed to pursue God and his kingdom whole-heartedly. Instead of placing our faith in our material resources, we’ll put our trust in God and in his abundant, spiritual resources. What is the meaning of life? Is it found in the creature comforts that easily distract us? Or is it found in knowing and experiencing God?

 *Second*, this passage should cause us to think about our mission as a church. If the poor, hungry, sorrowful, and oppressed are blessed and accepted into God’s kingdom, then we ought to welcome these kinds of folks into our community of faith. Yet this will require much time, effort, compassion, patience, and sacrifice on our part. People who have no problems or hang-ups easily fit into the life of the church because they pose few demands upon the community. They come and go every Sunday with smiles on their faces. Those who are marginalized require extra care to make them a part of the community. For most of their lives they have felt unaccepted and unloved. The hungry need to be fed. The bereaved need a quiet presence and a supporting shoulder to cry on. Those who are experiencing mental illness require compassion, understanding, and patience. In all these cases, ministry will not consist of a quick band-aid solution; it will be a long journey with hurting people.

 So, are we ready as individuals and as a church to embrace God’s kingdom?