

Upside Down and Inside Out

February 17, 2019 ~ 6th Sunday after Epiphany

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

Luke 6:17-26 (*The Message*)

¹⁷⁻²¹ Coming down off the mountain with them, he stood on a plain surrounded by disciples, and was soon joined by a huge congregation from all over Judea and Jerusalem, even from the seaside towns of Tyre and Sidon. They had come both to hear him and to be cured of their ailments. Those disturbed by evil spirits were healed. Everyone was trying to touch him—so much energy surging from him, so many people healed! Then he spoke:

You're blessed when you've lost it all.
God's kingdom is there for the finding.
You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.
Then you're ready for the Messianic meal.
You're blessed when the tears flow freely.
Joy comes with the morning.

²²⁻²³ "Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don't like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.

²⁴ But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made.
What you have is all you'll ever get.

²⁵ And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself.
Your *self* will not satisfy you for long.
And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games.
There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

²⁶ "There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.



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I sat with the family in the church fellowship hall after their matriarch's memorial service. Most of the friends and distant family members had departed, and the close family members, about 25 of them, asked if they could just linger to share in some conversation before they went their separate ways. After the exchange of family unit updates, a nine-year-old granddaughter suddenly stood up, placed her hands on her hips, and proclaimed, "I know that I was her favorite because she took me to get ice cream after every ball game whether I played or not." Then, as if it were a round-robin, one of her sons remembered, "I know that I was her favorite because she would look at my art work and declare that the world was just stunned by the beauty of each one."

One by one, each person in the room shared why they thought they were her favorite. No one had to make up a tale or exaggerate an encounter. "I know I was her favorite because no matter what I did, she always told me I was as good as gold." What a wonderful and treasured celebration ensued. For the family suddenly realized that their loved one offered each and every one unconditional acceptance and love, and expressed that as often as possible. It was true, not a-one was her favorite, for they were all her favorite. Individually and collectively, they felt her personal blessing and unfailing encouragement upon their lives.

While some of us can recall a person or group of people who gave us the sense of such blessing, not all can. Some of our neighbors journeyed through decades without a vote of confidence, an encouraging word, or a sense of family love. In fact, some knew little other than neglect, criticism, or abuse.

That is one of the many reasons that the church is so important to us. This is a place and a family set apart to be redemptive, especially to those who have been wounded in some way. Some churches are better at this than others. But, Rev. Sarah Jackson Shelton states, "The church's original challenge was to be the place where we would not just acknowledge God's imprints on our souls, but where we could also celebrate the divine image within." It is a place where spiritual parents can step in where earthly parents failed and bridge the gap for healing and restoration of personhood.

Now the Old Testament is full of stories wherein the search for blessing is the focus of an epic. There is the story of Jacob stealing his birthright blessing from his brother Esau. There is the story wherein Jacob refused to stop wrestling with an angel until he could receive a blessing. There is the story of Joseph and his brothers' jealousy that Joseph was given their father's blessing. And then comes Jesus, in the New Testament scriptures, who imparts blessing to all.

In our text for today we find that Jesus has been up on the mountain to pray. He selects his disciples and then comes down to be with the multitudes gathered, awaiting a word from this miracle-working prophet. People were gathered from all over: Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre, and Sidon. According to Luke, Jesus' message is meant to reach Jews and

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Gentiles alike. Jesus' ministries of healing and his teachings were inter-woven-- actions and words which experienced together, weave strangers into relationships that offer care for one another. The people came hoping to be woven into the tapestry of those touched by Jesus, empowered and made whole by him. They came looking for blessing.

So, Jesus' teachings begin with a short list of ways we can be blessed. The state of blessedness is characterized by abounding JOY! It is an awareness that bubbles up from deep within and overflows with an observable sense of elation. ***But Jesus' list of blessings is Upside Down and Inside Out!*** He completely contradicts the ideas and values of a materialistic society which equates happiness with possessions. AND, Jesus carefully constructs four symmetrical comparisons of **blessings and woes**. For he says:

Blessed are the poor... but woe to the rich.

Blessed are the hungry ... but woe to those who are full.

Blessed are the weeping ... but woe to those that are laughing.

Blessed are the rejected ... but woe to those who are accepted.

Upside Down and Inside Out!

As Jesus presents his thoughts to those gathered, it becomes apparent that he is not interested in keeping things the same. Rather, his purpose was to usher in a world that would literally be reversed. These blessings and woes announce that God, in Jesus Christ, already sees the world in a strikingly different way than most humans do. So, Jesus is painting a verbal picture of what God's reign on earth looks like: reversal of fortunes for the rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, the full and the empty, the popular and the lonely.

Oscar Romero once preached on this, stating: "The world says: blessed are the rich. You are worth as much as you have. But Christ says: wrong. Blessed are the poor... because they do not put their trust in what is so transitory. Blessed are the poor, for they know their riches are in the One who, being rich, made himself poor in order to enrich us with his poverty, teaching us the Christian's true wisdom." And you know, I think I could live with those blessings, as upside down as they are.

But then Jesus continues with the WOES, those definitions of when trouble is ahead. Don't we work hard to "get it all," to be satisfied, and to enjoy life on earth? Don't we all want to be liked, to be popular, to be among those with whom others want to hang-out? Jesus points out that most of those who have become popular have compromised authenticity and integrity somewhere along the journey. Most of the prophets, including Jesus, became very unpopular, very fast, as they told others about God's Upside Down and Inside Out vision for a world where love conquers evil, where light is stronger than darkness, and where the powerful go empty away.

Friends, I pray that we may be conduits of God's blessings, helping each one to know that they are a favorite, they are treasured, they are worthy of our time and effort, and certainly of God's love. May this be a family where redemption is recognized daily, as we see God's imprint on one another's souls, and celebrate the divine living in each one. Amen.