

Epiphany 6C
Luke 6:17-26
February 16, 2025

“Blessings and Woes”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

[Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 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 on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.’

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Most ministers welcome feedback on their sermons—more than just “Good sermon, Reverend” or “I didn’t agree with a word you said, but I like you,” feedback I have actually received. A certain woman approached her minister after the service and thanked him for his remarks. “I found it so helpful,” she said. The minister replied, “I hope it will *not* prove as helpful as the last sermon you heard me preach.” “Why, what do

you mean?” asked the astonished woman. “Well,” said the minister, “that sermon lasted you three months.”¹

I am certain that no sermon I have ever preached, or ever will, contains the depth of wisdom, breadth of exegesis, or timeliness of content to last anyone three months, let alone maintain its relevance for three years. Yet, Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain from Luke’s gospel, a portion of which we just heard, and the corresponding and better-known Sermon on the Mount from Matthew’s gospel have captivated and challenged audiences for more than 2,000 years. He was one heck of a preacher.

He begins, not by ascending a pulpit, telling a joke, or reciting a scripted prayer, but by coming down with the people who had gathered, standing with them on a level place, as the text says. He looked up at his disciples and began:

Blessed are you who are poor.
Blessed are you who are hungry now.
Blessed are you who weep now.
Blessed are you when people hate you . . . on my account.

But woe to you who are rich.
Woe to you who are full now.
Woe to you who are laughing now.
Woe to you when people speak well of you.

What a compelling way to start a sermon! My guess is that Jesus knew his audience, knew that the majority of them, like the majority of people living in first century Palestine, were poor, hungry, quite possibly sad, and most certainly looked down upon. Jesus also knew that the prevailing logic of his day held that people get what they deserve: that good things come to good people and bad things come to bad people, that righteousness is rewarded and wickedness is punished. If indeed people

¹ “Great Sermon,” Makeitclearnow.com: <https://www.makeitclearnow.org/relhumor.html#Sunday%20morning>.

are poor, hungry, weeping, and despised then they must deserve to be, must be bad people, right? Wrong! Blessed, that's what Jesus calls them. He flips the script. He counters the prevailing narrative. "When you're poor or hungry or weeping," he says, "God hasn't forgotten you and God isn't punishing you. God blesses you." He goes on, "as for wealth and bounty and laughter and honor, those are not rewards for good behavior. They are curses."

Once again, we see Jesus upending status quo with his radical vision of the Kingdom of God, as Mother Mary had done, and as the prophets had done before them. Jesus is calling to mind a state of being in which none are poor or hungry or weeping or looked down on while, at the very same time, others are rich, well-fed, laughing, and honored. The realm he envisions closes the gap between the haves and have-nots and, as he himself embodies at the beginning of the sermon when he comes down to stand on the plain, brings everyone onto a level playing field.

If Jesus were standing here today, or rather, right there, on the floor in front of the chancel, preaching these words to us, how might *we* feel? Empowered, justified, seen, indicted? Most of us are not the poor, underfed, weeping, despised folks to which he was primarily speaking that day, are we? Jesus has a message for us too. He calls us to use our resources to fill the gap, to level the playing field, to stand on the plain with everyone else.

Contrary to the beliefs of some, I don't think that Jesus was opposed to people having wealth in general or to rich people in particular. In fact, he regularly dined with the wealthy and taught among them. Some scholars have even suggested that his ministry was funded by a wealthy patron, or rather matron, Mary of Magdala. Jesus was, however, opposed to the hoarding of wealth. Jesus was unreservedly opposed to wealth accumulated on the backs of those living in poverty. Jesus was categorically opposed to the abysmal wealth gap that existed between the very richest and the very poorest. In his day, 9 out of 10 people lived at or below the subsistence level, with barely enough to scrape by, while the

10 percent at the top lived in the lap of luxury.² Jesus calls us to use our resources to fill the gap, to level the playing field, to stand on the plain with everyone else.

If Jesus were standing in the halls of congress or in the Oval Office today preaching these words now, I wonder how might his audience feel? This nation is home to 14 of the 15 wealthiest individuals in the world, the wealthiest of which possesses a fortune in excess of \$442 billion, the largest personal fortune the world has ever known.³ This is the richest nation in the world and yet we are trying to balance our budget by eliminating life-saving programs benefitting some of the poorest and most vulnerable populations in our nation and around the world. We are a nation where ethnicity, religion, gender, orientation, and physical ability have been weaponized to discriminate in the job market and the housing market, in higher education and government representation. And yet, affirmative action and diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are overturned by the Supreme Court or eliminated with the stroke of a pen. We are a nation of colonists and immigrants and yet, those seeking to escape lives of violence and poverty are being rounded up and sent away or put in prisons. Woe to us.

Jesus calls us to use our resources to fill the gap, to level the playing field, to stand on the plain with everyone else. Jesus calls us down onto the plain with him. The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, a minister at Slatersville Congregational Church in Rhode Island, reiterates Jesus' call to come down to the plain this way:

Come down with compassion to the border where asylum seekers meet the barrier of animosity and indifference. Come down with accountability to the houses of local, state, and federal legislatures enacting discriminatory and life-threatening laws targeting trans

² Sakari Häkkinen. "Poverty in first-century Galilee," Scielo.org, 2016:
https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222016000400046.

³ Sam Pizzigati. "What Would Surprise America's Rich in 2025? Not Getting Richer," Inequality.org, January 5, 2025:
<https://inequality.org/article/what-would-surprise-americas-rich-in-2025-not-getting-richer/>.

*folks. Come down with affirmation of difference and commitment to the fullness of the beloved community when corporations and other institutions abandon their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Come down with the righteousness and justice of the reign of God when false prophets and powerful leaders make heretical claims that the love of God may be stratified and withheld for political and personal gain. Come down with them in your neighborhood, your community, your state, your country, and your world.*⁴

“Come down to the plain,” Jesus calls us. Use our resources to fill the gap, to level the playing field, to stand on the plain with everyone else. Come down to the plain that together we might ascend anew. May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Cheryl Lindsay. “Sermon Seeds: Down with Them,” Ucc.org, February 16, 2025: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-down-with-them/>.