

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor  
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, February 13, 2022**

**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany /Year C**

**First Reading: Jeremiah 17:5-10**

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20**

**Gospel Reading: Luke 6:17-26**

**Sermon Title: "The 'Blessed are You's' & the 'Woe to You's'"**

## **Theme**

*After choosing his twelve disciples, Jesus teaches a crowd of followers about the nature and demands of discipleship. He begins his great sermon with surprising statements about who is truly blessed in the eyes of God.*

## **Text**

<sup>17</sup>[Jesus] came down with [the twelve] 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. <sup>18</sup>They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup>And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

<sup>20</sup>Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup>“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup>“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

<sup>24</sup>“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup>“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.

<sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

## Sermon

A little context will help us understand what is going on in today's Gospel Reading.

Back on the weekend of January 23, the Gospel Reading was from Luke Chapter 4 and was the story of Jesus leading worship in his hometown of Nazareth. Arguably, it was his first outing as God's Messiah. You will recall that he went to worship at the local synagogue, as was his custom, and he read from the prophet Isaiah where it is written,

<sup>18</sup>“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Everything was going great so far. Luke went on:

<sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>Then he *began to say* to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

And that is where the Gospel Reading ended on that day.

"Began to say" is an important phrase in verse 21, because, even though the reading continued the next weekend, January 30, I don't think we get the entire sermon that Jesus preached that day. But Luke recorded enough didn't he? Whatever Jesus said enraged the Nazarenes to the point that they tried to kill him!

After that, Jesus began traveling by himself going from town to town, preaching and teaching, and performing signs and miracles, and creating quite a sensation. Already by Luke Chapter 6, he was being followed by crowds of people. And then just before this passage that is our Gospel Reading for today, he finally selected and called twelve of his followers to be his disciples.

Thank you for hanging with me, all that was necessary for you to understand what is going on in today's Gospel Reading. Again, in Chapter 6, Luke wrote that Jesus was accompanied by

a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.<sup>18</sup> They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup>And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Jesus had command over the crowd. He gave them what they wanted and all were satisfied. Luke continued, then he looked up at his disciples and what he said was the Beatitudes according to Luke – at least the *blessed are you's*.

We love those, don't we? "Blessed are they, the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of God." Joan didn't select that song today because that is Matthew's version and he didn't record the *woe to you's* - the *woe to you's* - you know what I am talking about. Verses 24-26. Allow me to read them for you again.

<sup>24</sup>“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup>“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.

<sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all speak well of you,  
or that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

Joan, I'm not aware that anyone has put the *woe to you's* to music, are you? We like the *blessed are you's* but we don't like the *woe to you's*.

You know, it's kind of like that Gospel Reading I referred to earlier where Jesus preached in his hometown of Nazareth but went too far. If he would have just stuck to the words that made the people feel good about themselves everyone would have been happy. Maybe then he would have become the messiah they wanted and he could have avoided that messy cross business.

Within theological circles, we talk about two different theologies that are espoused in two different church traditions, resulting in two different styles of preaching.

There is the *Theology of Glory*, which is espoused by many of the biggest evangelical churches that we know of. That shouldn't surprise us.

They don't waste time during the service getting on their knees and confessing their sins. Most people don't like that. Not only does it wrinkle their clothes, but it forces people to reflect on their own sinfulness – they like the "blessed are you's" but when they spend too much time on their knees confronted by the "woe to you's" they get *uncomfortable*.

They don't celebrate Holy Communion very often either. All that talk about Jesus' body and blood given and shed for you is, frankly, gross and off-putting.

By avoiding just these two rituals they avoid confronting and offending their fans who by the way, are the ones paying for their ministries. I've known people that have left mainline churches for evangelical churches and they have mentioned to me how good they feel coming out of worship.

The alternative to the *Theology of Glory* is what Lutherans and most mainline denominations espouse and that is called the *Theology of the Cross*. The *Theology of the Cross* unapologetically teaches that all people are destined for hell because we are addicted to sin. Sin is defined as turning in on oneself rather than turning outward toward others which is the example of Christ. The *Theology of the Cross* teaches that Jesus Christ came to give himself as an example of the godly life, and when his example wasn't enough, he gave himself, his very body and blood, nailed to a cross till dead, as the perfect sacrifice for the sin of humankind – something he alone could do.

We regularly get on our knees and confess our sins because we know that it is because of our sins that he died. When we reflect on our week or our day and compare it to his example we cannot help but come to the conclusion that we really haven't lived up to his example and that causes us to seek God's forgiveness.

We regularly celebrate Holy Communion because 1) Jesus commanded us to every time we get together, and 2) because he doesn't want us to forget the price he paid

for our sinfulness, hence the repeated words, "Do this in remembrance of me." The visceral language Jesus used is the weekly cold hard slap in the face we need to get over ourselves, for thinking we're not so bad.

Now, every time I mention another church I get criticized. Save your emails. I recognize that because of those churches, many are coming to Christ that might not have otherwise. Clearly, evangelical churches are more popular than mainline churches like the Lutheran church, but like Jesus, I'm not going to give us half-truths to win your appreciation. I'm not going to sugar-coat the truth for us. And I'm not going to affirm our bad behavior – and by the way, notice I include myself in that condemnation.

In the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus preached the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. To preach verses 20-23 and sit down is half the truth. Can you handle the whole truth?

<sup>24</sup>“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

Oh man, aren't you sorry Jesus went there?

You may not think you are rich, but all of us are, in comparison to the world's population. Allow me to give you a single statistic. If your household has an income of \$100,000 you are in the richest 1% of the global population and your household income is 35.4 times the global median. (GivingWhatWeCan.org) Congratulations on our wealth. Jesus says we have received our consolation, meaning our comfort and security comes from our wealth now.

<sup>25a</sup>“Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.

Mahoning County is not the most affluent and cosmopolitan community in the world, but we can go to our supermarkets and buy almost anything we want, any time of the year that we want it. And though there is relative hunger in our community and country, in 2019, close to 750 million – or nearly one in ten people in the entire world – were exposed to severe levels of food insecurity. Oh, we feel good about ourselves when the WHO or UNICEF or ELCA World Hunger shows

up with tons of rice – and that *is* a good thing – but an estimated 2 billion people, or 26% of the world's population, did not have regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food in 2019. (FAO.org)

<sup>25b</sup>“Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

I confess, laughing and weeping are difficult to quantify, but I think we can agree that conflict, war, poverty, and hunger are significant causes for unhappiness. We have a lot of nerve sitting in comfort, enjoying a glass of wine, and quibbling about politics when corruption and prejudice, and abuse of power lead to the extermination of genders, tribes, and nations around the world.

<sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all speak well of you,  
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

At one time, many years ago, I was on the board of a local organization that created an award that was to be handed out every year to a local citizen who provided extraordinary contributions of time, talent, or treasure that have had a profound and long-lasting effect upon the community. As the pastor of a local church in that community, I nominated a couple of people on a couple of occasions and they never won. Do you know who did win? Well-known local wealthy people. I'm not going to say that the wealthy people were undeserving. I am sure good work was done with their large charitable donations. But giving them another crystal vase with their name carved on it seems like a suck-up move.

Put another way, everyone knows who Jeff Bezos is. He's the wealthiest person in the United States at an estimated \$177 billion. If he tithed that, and gave away, \$17.7 billion, do you think he could get by off the rest? Not much of a sacrifice is it?

Look, I would love it if Bezos was a member of this church, but his wealth shouldn't overshadow the many of you who

- unload the Second Harvest truck on Tuesdays and bag it up and then distribute it on Saturdays;
- teach the faith;

- take Holy Communion to our homebound;
- or Lead us in our Prayers of Intercession.

Jesus said we should be careful when others speak well of us. They probably just want something from us.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Well, I hope we're all offended by these words today. Jesus intended to be an equal opportunity offender.

"But pastor, we come to church to sing beautiful songs and be told we're loved by God just the way we are. We want our lives and our ways to be affirmed, to be told that we are a blessing."

Maybe you're not. Maybe you're a selfish egocentric boob. Or maybe you are as generous as Mother Theresa. Honestly, none of that matters. In the Second Reading, the apostle Paul wrote that without Christ's death and resurrection we are all simply without hope. But because he died for our sins, we are forgiven. And because he resurrected from the dead, it is he who has opened the gate to eternal life.

Sinners that we are, we cannot achieve eternal life on our own. It comes as the free gift of grace given to those who put their faith in him (Period).

But to not be transformed by the knowledge of his grace is to make it cheap grace. So the one who is truly transformed by his grace is truly transformed in their life.

We who have been given so much, look to him who gave it all, as the model of godly living, and embrace his teachings – all of them;

- the *blessed are you's* which affirm the things we do that are godly;
- and the *woe to you's* that God finds abhorrent and causes God to turn away from us.

Get angry if you want, but as for me, I thank God revealed in Jesus Christ that he causes me to ponder where I have fallen short so that I can change my behavior to

become more like him. Not because I get something out of it – I've already been given more than I deserve or can imagine - but because I want to please him as my thankful response and sacrifice of praise.

### **Prayer**

Loving God, out of your great love, you created us with free will and freedom of choice. By the power of the Holy Spirit, speak your word through scripture that we are inspired to live humbly and generously according to the example of your Son and our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray this in his name. Amen