

Sunday, February 17 and Wednesday, February 20, 2019
Third Sunday after the Epiphany + Luke 6:17-26
“Positioned for Kingdom Living”

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI
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An interesting question was floated recently on a history web site: “How much of recorded history is true?” Here’s what one historian wrote, and he wasn’t the only one:

“Absolutely none of it. If you are searching for truth go to the philosophy department or the theology department.”

What he means is that when you are reading a history book you are reading one possible perspective on history, and that perspective is based on what resources the historian found plus the perspective of the historian writing it – which is why it’s important to read several sources on a given topic if you want to get a full picture.

Scripture too is very open to interpretation based on what people want to hear, what reinforces the way they already see the world. Many people don’t want Jesus turning everything upside down. So some people have used his “Blessings and Woes” as weapons to judge others and get out of having to respond themselves: If you’re poor, just put up with it because in heaven you’ll get everything you want. And if you’re rich, you’d better clean up your act or else.

But context is everything, just like in the writing of history. Jesus is giving his first public sermon to a huge crowd of people who are hanging on every word in their amazement over the healings he’s just done. So he’s going to make the most of this moment and do a lot more than hand out judgments on the poor and rich.

To see what he's up to, we need to step back and remind ourselves of Jesus' identity and mission on earth. Jesus is God in flesh and blood who entered human history because God was doing a new thing. Humankind on its own could not escape the suffocating weight of sin, so Jesus took our sin upon himself. Think of it as a "get out of jail free" card for every person who has lived and ever will live!

In his death and resurrection, Jesus shattered power of death, that all-consuming fear that causes people to build their own personal empires because they think that's all there is to life. But we know Jesus' body was given for us and his blood shed for us, for the forgiveness of sin. This frees us to live as people beloved by God, each of us fully loved and fully forgiven, knowing that love and life has conquered fear and death. And the systems of the world that depended on fear, control, and the exercise of oppression are dead in the water.

This is the new creation that Jesus is proclaiming, which we call the kingdom of God. Jesus spent his life on earth calling people into kingdom living.

But we aren't equipped to jump right in. First we have to orient ourselves to Jesus' call. This involves decluttering our inner life. We are pretty good at filling up every spare moment with activity, to the point that life consists of little more than rushing from one thing to the next. But God needs us to have empty spaces, so that God can fill those reservoirs of our soul with the awareness of what it is to live as kingdom people.

These are the marching orders that we get in Jesus' Blessings and Woes. Jesus is telling us exactly how to position ourselves. There is no more potent prescription for kingdom living than this.

What he's doing is addressing the implications of certain conditions of human life for kingdom living. The blessings address conditions of loss; the woes address conditions of possession, all in the present. But this is not a static assessment of where people are. Becoming aware of these allows us to move into God's kingdom.

You can hear this clearly in Eugene Peterson's earthy translation of the Bible known as The Message. I'll project the specific verses from Luke's Gospel so that you can see his interpretation more clearly.

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

"You're blessed when you've lost it all. [because then you can see that] God's kingdom is there for the finding."

Remember "finders weepers, losers keepers" from Mark 8? "For those who save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." When we allow our fortresses of fear to dissolve, then we can see into God's kingdom.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal."

If we feed ourselves a steady diet of the good life, we can't know what spiritual hunger is. When we allow ourselves to let go of the need for self-gratification, only then

can we sing with the psalmist of Psalm 63, “O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

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

“You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning.”

Only when we let go of our determination to shove our troubles aside and push forward, to be a cheerful person like the self-help books tell us, can we open ourselves to grief. And only when we experience the very human condition of loss and sorrow can we experience its counterpart, deep joy. Both are expressions of God's love.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.²³ 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.

“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

Only when we let go of our fear of proclaiming the gospel because it might offend someone can we begin to do God's work. In Matthew 12 Jesus says, “Whoever is not with me is against me.” You must take a stand for Jesus and God's kingdom. Inevitably you'll encounter opposition. Jesus did, everywhere he went, even in his own hometown.

And the second part of this blessing: “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.”

All the prophets and disciples – every one.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. [Then] What you have is all you'll ever get.”

Jesus says, all you have is your fortress of wealth, of power, of control. And when the stock market crashes, or if you are dethroned—then you have nothing. And Jesus will be waiting there for you with open arms.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

“And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long.

And Jesus will be there waiting for you with open arms.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

“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.”

And Jesus says, this is the reality of life, and if you ignore it, the suffering will only be a whole lot worse at some point. And Jesus will be there waiting for you with open arms.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

“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.”

The approval you crave from others can change on a dime, and the mountain of flattery you have built for yourself *will* crumble -- because it is built on sand, not on solid ground. And Jesus will be there waiting for you with open arms.

Rejoice and be glad! Yours is the kingdom. Shine for all to see.