

## Sermon on Luke 6, Blessings and Woes, Epiphany 6, Feb. 13, 2022

This passage from Luke and the corresponding Sermon on the Mount from Matthew have always worried me a little. I liked the part about the poor being blessed, because I always felt like I was poor, not rich. Especially as a student. I think in my first year I had about \$300 spending money for the whole school year to get anything besides my room and board and tuition. And maybe textbooks. That was \$35 a month and back then, in the 70s, that was not a lot of money. I was poor compared to my fellow students.

Later on, when Charles was newly ordained, he was a Curate in the Diocese of Toronto, and believe me, his salary wasn't that high, and I was a student, with a few grants and things, but no real income. Later on, we had 3 kids on a clergy stipend and I stayed home with them, so, again, we felt poor, and our debt load kind of crept up year after year. But as long as we were feeling poor, this reading made me feel smug: I was blessed.

And you know, that kind of continued over the years, as things continued like that and our debt load increased. Honestly, I worried constantly about money. But even then, you know, both Charles and I had a university education. We had access to a line of credit. We had a good house to live in, even if it wasn't ours, and we had enough to eat and we all had decent clothing, even if we'd bought it at Frenchys. So, how poor were we?

And then a few years back, Charles' aunt died and left us quite a bit of money and we could pay off all our debts and have money for a down payment for our house and could actually relax and stop worrying about money. Which was such a relief! And at that point, this reading started to worry me even more. Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full now.... Were we rich? Us?

Compared with Steve Jobs or Bill Gates or one of those guys, definitely not rich. Compared to, say, our food bank clients, pretty well to do. Compared to the Rohingya refugees in a camp on the border of Myanmar, well the whole lot of us are rich, even our food bank clients. And actually, this was true even back when we felt poor. And it's true for everyone: some people are richer than us and some are poorer. So I kind of decided that rather than setting out a sort of formula for who would be blessed and who wouldn't, Jesus was kind of shaking up the way we think. Letting us know that the whole framework of our thinking is probably wrong. He does that a lot.

Because our society figures rich people are blessed. Some Christians, those of the prosperity gospel, even preach that riches are a reward from God for being good Christians. Jesus says no. He says the poor are blessed because theirs is the Kingdom of God and woe to the rich because they have their consolation. I think that's important. I mean, riches can be a great consolation if you're poor. It sure felt good when we paid off our debts, something we'd wondered if we'd ever be able to do. But those who put their trust in riches are usually disappointed. And those who hoard them to themselves are frankly missing the point of life. Much better to share our riches with the poor and our bread with the hungry while we have them and so be part of a strong community that will be of far more value and give us far more peace of mind and blessedness than money in the bank will.

I think Jesus is also pointing out that none of these things is eternal. Whether we're poor or rich can change. Someone leaves you money or you win the lottery and suddenly you're rich where you were poor. The stock market crashes and suddenly you're poor when you were rich. These are not things you can truly count on.

Same for mourning and laughing. You might feel sad one day. Perhaps you've lost someone and you're sad. But then maybe a baby is born and you're glad. Our feelings go up and down all the time. I've had all sorts of different feelings this week alone from deep sadness to deep joy to strong anger to contentment. These things change like the weather. And putting your trust in the way people speak about you is very foolish. The smallest thing and that can change. Public opinion is even more changeable than the weather.

Jesus makes all these statements that are completely the opposite of the way we usually think to make us change our thinking. Riches and a good reputation and even constant happiness are not the important things in life. These are not the eternal things.

I think whoever chose the Old Testament readings for today, to pair them with this gospel reading, really hit the nail on the head about what Jesus is getting at here. Both of them talk about what happens to the ones who trust in worldly things. They are like shrubs putting their roots down in a desert land. When there's a drought, which there often is, they have nothing to draw on. They dry up, wither, and maybe even blow away.

But those who put their trust in God, who delight in the Lord, they are like those same trees planted by a stream of water. Their roots go deep into that lovely damp earth and when there's a drought, and no rain for a while, they're OK. They have something to draw on. They're rooted deep in God and they don't have to rely on the world's resources. Theirs is the Kingdom of God.

Doesn't mean they won't face droughts. The same drought will come to those planted in the dry desert and those planted by the stream. But the ones by the stream have another source of water to keep them going. They have their relationship with the Living God. God is like living water springing up to eternal life within their souls. Because of that they will be able to live through the drought and even still produce fruit, the fruit of the Spirit, while the desert shrubs dry up and maybe even blow away.

Well, by any measure, we have been going through some hard times lately. We're almost at two years of Covid and lockdowns and restrictions and all that and we are all very tired. There are days when we don't know how much longer we can carry on. I've talked to a number of people this week who are feeling bored, restless, tired and unmotivated. And cranky. Remember at the beginning of this, people were learning how to garden and make bread and were cleaning out their storage rooms and learning to knit or learning French or something? Renovating their houses? Not very many people are doing that now. We're just tired.

Most of us are also feeling pretty alarmed by the events in the capital. There are people there who say they won't leave until the government resigns *en masse* and all restrictions are dropped. Frankly, I don't think that would make anything better. I don't want anarchy and I trust our medical officers of health. And the fact that doctors and nurses and other health care workers are being targeted by some of these people is really upsetting. I find the whole situation troubling. This is on many of our minds and people are worrying about it. And rightly so. It just seems there's so much to worry about.

Of course, there's also good news. The NS government raised the pay for Continuing Care workers this week, which should help keep them in their jobs and attract more so the nursing homes can start taking new people again and caring for them properly. Minimum wage is going up to \$15 an hour over a couple years and that's good news. Even restaurant owners had no trouble with that. Halifax is on the verge of bringing in the HalifACT, that would make us one of the leading cities in the country for environmental protection. I hope this goes through. And Dr. Strang has loosened some restrictions, because we in NS have been doing the right things. More good news. Things to give us hope.

Still, this is a difficult time for our country, our province, our community. You might say we were in a drought situation, with some nice rain from time to time, but not enough to really let us relax. What I take from today's readings is that, while reading the daily news or, even worse, doomscrolling on Facebook, may just make us feel more anxious and hopeless and lost - make us wither up so to speak - we do also have a source of life and hope and inner peace and love. We are deeply rooted and grounded in the Lord. Our roots go down to the living water that Jesus promised us if we follow him.

And when we start to feel weary and depressed and anxious, we can always delve a little deeper into the Scriptures, into our prayer lives, into the prayer and worship of the church. And if we don't have the energy to do that ourselves, we can always ask someone in the church community to help us. I was feeling pretty down on Thursday. I had a cold (tested negative for Covid twice, and it's over now, so no worries), I was tired, the news was depressing, and I couldn't walk in the woods for ice and I couldn't see my friends or go anywhere because I was sick. I phoned a colleague and talked. I reached out to some friends of mine and asked them to pray for me. And to our prayer group. And then I took a nap. And I felt better afterwards. That evening I said Evening Prayer, which also helped.

We have resources. And we shouldn't forget the beginning of that story we read today. Jesus was going among all the gathered people and healing them and freeing them from their demons. Jesus is still doing that, among us, and is working to heal us, too. He still has that power. And we shouldn't forget the Corinthians reading. Paul reminds us, in his usual wordy way, that we are a resurrection people. We believe in resurrection. We don't think death is the end. And in life, too, the hopeless stuff is not the end. This situation, too, shall pass. It shall end, like every other pandemic or conflict in the history of the world. And we shall be like trees planted by the water. In the year of drought, we are not anxious (or at least not as anxious as those without this relationship), our leaves are green and we do not cease to bear fruit, because our trust is in the Lord. And that is eternal. Hang in there. Together we will get through this time of woe and again feel blessed.