

“The ones who need to get back on their feet”

Sermon on Sunday, February 17, 2019

Based on Luke 6: 17-26

I have to admit: preparing for this Sunday's sermon wasn't easy and preaching it may not be any easier. Some of Jesus' teachings are tough and disturbing, and we're not always ready to meet that blistering intensity. I certainly wasn't ready for it when I sat down to ponder the Lukan version of the Beatitudes on Friday morning, the day after Valentine's, two days removed from our 20th wedding anniversary, sitting in a cute little breakfast café in Lambertville, New Jersey, sipping a Latte with a heart of steamed milk on top. We were away for two days. The day before, on Thursday, I had talked to one member of our church who is in dire straits. And I had a conversation with another church member who had been approached by someone in dire straits. None of those two scenarios were easy, both defied quick solutions. I had those individuals in mind when I heard Jesus' words, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." And of course, it goes without saying, this is something that only a poor person can say to another poor person. Jesus qualified.

The rich person, or those who are reasonably well off, - middle class people, living wage people, our first instinct is always to help that person out of poverty. We are scared of poverty. And while that instinct is not bad, Jesus' approach is different. We never see him crusade against poverty, which is surprising, isn't it? He doesn't teach people how to get rich or how to get "back on their feet," as we say. In fact, there isn't, to my knowledge, a single passage where Jesus is even slightly uncomfortable in the presence of a poor person, maybe because it was so common back then. "Blessed are you who are poor," he said. He didn't say, "Too bad you are poor. I feel so bad for you, let me help you." No, he added, "Yours is the kingdom of God!"

That's where he starts, without any "I will make you better" agenda in mind. I asked myself, "When was the last time I met a visibly poor person, thinking that this person is blessed? Was there ever such a time? Probably not. And probably I couldn't bring myself to think that way even right now. I much prefer to be a fixer and problem solver. Aren't we all?"

And I want to emphasize: that's not a bad thing. For a boatload of reasons, it's a good thing that we want to help others. In church we nurture this human instinct for compassion, we give people opportunities to serve, opportunities to give, opportunities to make this world a little bit better. And I think this is god-ordained and hugely important... but interestingly, it's not where Jesus starts!

Jesus starts by telling the fellow poor person, "You are blessed, you are honored, you are happy," whichever translation we choose. It's a hard lesson to learn. Would God give us the grace to see in our brothers and sisters who are struggling more than what meets the eye? In fact, if this is the heart of Jesus' message, and the Beatitudes are certainly not a fringe teaching of Jesus, I have to learn a whole lot, in the way I look at the world and see people. I think few people are fully able to understand this Jesus of the Beatitudes. I have a hunch that nobody understands Jesus' words in full who hasn't been poor. Saint Francis knew what he meant. Mother Theresa did. Dorothy Day and the people of the Catholic worker movement did. And all these saints have one thing in common: they loved the poor unconditionally and they were not afraid to be in touch with them, literally and figuratively.

I was again in the same nice little place in Lambertville on Saturday morning when I started writing the second part of this sermon. And guess what, it was even tougher, that second part! I had to remind myself to whom Luke wrote and dedicated his book. Luke, you see, is the only gospel in the New Testament addressed to an actual person. In the introduction, he dedicates it to his friend Theophilus, a young Christian convert and probably, I hate to say it, wealthy person! In other words: this gospel was custom-written for a well-off, middle class Greek-speaking individual. I wonder whether Theophilus spilled his drink, when he came to the second part of the Lukan Beatitudes, where Jesus says,

²⁴ "But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ "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.

²⁶ "Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Yikes! This is one of the New Testament passages we don't like to talk about. We won't print these words on a poster and hang them up in the church. They make us uncomfortable. We think that all the things mentioned here— eating, having enough money, laughing, having people talk well about you are all not only good but wonderful things. And I actually think they are! In this passage it is all about the contrast between the plight of some and the overflowing resources of others that is being chastised. This economic divide does not reflect the vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached and taught and breathed and fought for. In a way, what Jesus is teaching in these Lukan Beatitudes is this: you who are comfortable and even rich, you are the ones who need to get back on your feet. You are the ones to whom God has given much, and much is expected of you; you are the ones who have the most leverage to make this a more just, God-pleasing world. Don't miss your opportunity by being too comfortable! Get back on your feet, all you who are well off, and do your part!

I remember going down to New Creation in Philadelphia with a few of our people. It was a cold December afternoon. We were greeted by a frigid building and we kept our coats on. The heater was broken. The building was crumbling in spots; the pastor wasn't getting paid but lived from her retirement, we learned. But the ministry was very much alive there. And hospitality! They went to the local bakery to buy us fresh hoagies. "This is the best bakery in the neighborhood," they said. Come, have some more! New Creation supplies homeless people every Friday night. They have a feeding program for neighborhood children. They have a special connection to this first part of the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor! And I want to add: Blessed are the people of New Creation! Blessed is their pastor, Lyzette Rios! You will meet her on our March 16 fundraiser dinner. Now let's keep in mind that all the things we are doing through St. Peter's in other parts of the world, in other parts of our community, all the things our Social Ministry Team, our Outreach Team engages us is, are what we are called to do, because we can! And because quite honestly, often times, we are the ones who really need to get back on our feet! And blessed are we if we get up and use our gifts! **Amen.**