

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Jeremiah 17:5-10

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be forever acceptable in your sight Oh Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

The gospel scene today begins with a descent. Jesus “comes down” to a level place with his disciples. He mingles with a “great crowd” who have gathered to hear Jesus’s teachings and to be healed by Him. Jesus lifts up his gaze upon his disciples and delivers teachings which turn the order of the world upside down.

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping—those who are hated, excluded, insulted, and cast out. You, Jesus says, you who suffer, you are blessed. Not only are the lowliest among you blessed, but you have been given a promise by God. As your stomach turns in hunger, it will be filled. You poor who have little or nothing to call your own, you will be given the kingdom of God.

What a strange promise, how difficult to believe! Not only for those people who stood in the swelling crowd, suffering from disease, poverty, and sorrow, but for us too. In a world that shames those in poverty and hides those in pain, how is it possible to see these worldly failings as blessings?

Jesus shows us through His very life. To be truly blessed is not to avoid difficulty. Jesus himself, beloved Son of God, suffers greatly. His neck is bent beneath the greatest yoke. While in the world, He is hated, excluded, reviled. Though He knows of God’s promises, Jesus still weeps from sorrow. He suffers death on the cross—he is sacrificed for us.

To be blessed, then, is in some way to come closer to Jesus, to His life and message.

The second part of Jesus’s teaching is designed, I think, to make all those who hear it uncomfortable. In a few sentences, Jesus overturns all that we think we know about the world order. Woe to the rich, the full, those who laugh and think themselves above the rest, they will weep and mourn.

It is not the kings we should envy, not the victors. It is those who we think below us, unworthy of what *we* have, who are truly above us.

The values of Jesus's time are not unlike our own. The world has remained remarkably consistent in the value it places on prestige and riches. What Jesus's teaching tells us is that God does not see us as the world does or, likely, as we see ourselves.

God does not love us more because we have reached the highest echelons of society. He will not praise us for our riches, for our degrees, for our prestige, or worldly importance when we meet Him at the last. These things are of and for the world. It is the gospels which tell us what is of true value and Jesus's life which is meant to serve as our model and guide.

This is radical and the task before us difficult. We are immersed in the world and its teachings. In American society, we are given a model for success completely unlike that which Jesus provides and many are consumed by its pressures. To suffer from poverty and hunger is to fail. To accumulate wealth, attend the best schools, and socialize with the most important people is to succeed. This is what our world tells us and what Jesus fervently disputes.

Our outward success pulls us further from God because it disconnects us from what is of true and lasting value. In our wealth, we are shielded from others poverty. In our happiness, we forget those who suffer. As we are universally loved and praised, we think ourselves better than those who are misunderstood and cast out.

I do not think that what Jesus teaches is that God hates those who are rich or joyous; His love is greater than we can possibly conceive of. Instead, Jesus seeks to remind us how profoundly we must shift our perspective in order to see ourselves and others as God sees us.

To see ourselves as God does is to recognize what is truly valuable within us—our kindness, mercy, and love. When we give way to what is higher, we let go of the lower—our selfishness, jealousy, and greed. Jesus offers us this transformation. Through his teachings, he turns the world upside down so that we can see the world and ourselves as God does.

As we reflect upon Jesus's teachings, we are transformed. As we weep, in our times of greatest sorrow, perhaps we will come to feel Jesus's presence with us and think ourselves blessed.