

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany + February 16, 2025
Pastor Priscilla Geerde + Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry Transition

Prayer of the Day

Living God, in Christ you make all things new. Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your glory, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Gospel: Luke 6:17-26

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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 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. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. “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. “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

Sermon by Pastor Priscilla Geerde

When my kids were a lot younger, they had a Dr. Seuss game that was called, “I can do that!” It involved cards that had a series of tasks on them that you had to determine whether or not you thought you could it, and then do it. You gained or lost points based on how successful you were. Overall, it was a really good game for young kids' agility and balance as several tasks involved doing things on one foot or backward. However, it was possibly the worst game to play as an adult! Not because it was boring or too easy, but because it involved this foam gate that stood roughly two feet high that involved tasks like crawling under it. I remember one time, the kids desperately wanted to play it with my parents, and my late 60 something dad got the card about crawling under this gate. He looked at it, then the kids, and said “I can't do that!” Whenever the kids wanted to play the

game, my husband and I tried to suck it up and do our bests, but we did not like doing that. In fact, we sometimes still joke about when it comes time to play something, because we'd love to see our 21- and 18-years old squeeze through the gate now. It was a good game, but whether or not you could do something did not start on a level playing ground.

Perhaps you've heard today's gospel referred to in the past as the sermon on the mount where Jesus preaches the Beatitudes, and that would be appropriate if we were in the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus ascends a mountain to preach the word. However, here in Luke, this is referred to as the sermon on the plain because Jesus instead comes down from a height and speaks to the people "on a level place". Now, neither the mountain or the plain changes the harshness or reality of what Jesus speaks, and we'll get to that, but I think it does give us a different feeling of how Jesus is trying to communicate the words. Is he above it all or in the midst of it all? And in good Lutheran fashion I will say he is both, he is above it all and in the midst of it all, and in that way, he shows us that it involves us all. No matter how much we'd rather not be.

A theologian by the name of Fredrick Buechner said about these verses, "The world says, 'Mind your own business' and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.'" In these blessings and woes, Jesus is not pitting group against group, or telling people how to live or mind their business, he is telling the truth about how the kingdom of God works, and how it is different than the way the world works and that is all our business. Luke doesn't soften it like Matthew where people are poor in Spirit or hunger and thirst for righteousness. Luke says it straight up-God favors those who live here are hard, unfair, unjust, oppressed, where they are told they can't do that, and God cautions all those who think they have the good life, the resources to be secure, who get to choose their battles and pick when and where they want to act or try and look down upon others who struggle. Jesus comes down to that level ground exactly to show that life is not lived on level ground, and it is not because some are good and some are bad. It is because sin exists and it puts people into difficult situations and pits people against each other so that hunger and thirst and poverty and injustice are seen as punishments that are justly deserved and wealth, comfort, and security are seen as rewards for a good person. But Jesus points out the lies told in those statements-poverty, hunger, thirst, being reviled come from a broken system that judged people unfairly as sinners and prevented people without means or with disabilities or differences from learning and earning and kept them trapped in a terrible system designed to keep them on the outside and at the bottom, while having your fill, living a good life, being able to look down on people and being well spoken of came from a system that supported certain people and gave them advantages that kept them from being the poor and outcast. It wasn't because some people were better and

some were worse, but because some could and some couldn't and the world rewards those who can.

And unfortunately, it still does. This life is not a level ground, and while it benefits our sense of comfort and self-righteousness to pretend that everyone has an equal shot in this world, it leaves us in a world of woes for the future, and Jesus can't leave us there thinking some deserve the worst while we deserve the best. Instead, Jesus comes to the level ground and tries to open our eyes to how the kingdom of God grants blessing in the midst of suffering, offers sustenance in the midst of hunger, and offers a chance to change our hearts and minds about who and how we revile. If someone can't seem to make it to what we deem a good life or a good place, it could very well be because of factors we as a community need to address and change. People don't choose to go hungry or grieve or be reviled, everyone would choose consolation if they could.

It's a hard word Jesus speaks to us today because most of can consider ourselves the ones falling in the woes. People mostly speak well of us, we're full, we've had our coffee and though we may weep, it probably isn't to the point of wondering if we can even make it to tomorrow or provide for our family. Most of us aren't being looked upon as bad people, or unwanted elements, or drains on society, or sinful, or the reason the world is falling apart. Most of us are the ones saying that about others, others who Jesus Christ, the Son of God, calls the blessed. Yeah, it's a bit harsh today, but we can take it, we can hear it, and we can work to heal it and change it.

Because the other thing Jesus tells us by coming to that level ground where the power is coming out of him to heal the crowds, is that we're in it together, that blessing and woes are all our business and that in working to change ourselves, to heal the persecution, to acknowledge the indifference and the disparity, we all become the blessed because we do grow rich in Spirit, we begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness (not just our own but for all people), we begin to hope that people will revile and hate us because we are living out the name of the Son of God. Jesus shakes up the world, and the world doesn't like it. The world says some shouldn't, aren't worthy, can't, and Christ tells us that everyone is necessary, change is possible, and that life can be better for everyone. It may mean giving up a few comforts, recognizing the inequality and judgment, and some repentance, but blessing for all the reward, and whoa, no woes. So what sounds like harsh words from Jesus, are really the promise of a more just and fulfilling life for all people. They are the words that remind us that we're not in this for ourselves, we are community, a people of God, the body of Christ where all members matter-literally a be attitude-be loving, be aware, be giving, be forgiving, be just, be, and be blessed. Amen.

Prayers

With the Spirit of Christ shining upon us, let us boldly pray for the church, the world, and all of creation.

Blessed is your church transformed by your Spirit. Give us courage to proclaim to all people the promises made true in the death and resurrection of Christ. God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Blessed is creation. As earth experiences destruction from harmful practices and climate change, give us courage to help bring about its restoration. Encourage those who work in forestry to be a voice for the hidden places of creation and provide skills for its conservation. God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Blessed are the nations. We pray for presidents, prime ministers, and leaders of nations. Grant that their courage will not run dry in the face of challenge, but that they will delight in the fountain of your righteousness. God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Blessed are those in need. Give to all facing illness wise and caring doctors, nurses, and therapists. Draw close to those who feel far from you or who are suffering in any way. Provide an extra measure of your grace and love. God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Blessed is this congregation. Like a tree planted by streams of water, we are nourished by faith in you. Provide courage in times that feel dry, trusting that you sustain us in many ways. God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Blessed are those saints who now rest in your peace. Through lives of both sorrow and joy, challenge and triumph, they provide witness of faith in all times. May their lives be a witness to the living. God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

We entrust our prayers to you, O God, in the sure and certain hope that your promise is revealed among the people. **Amen.**

Blessing

The Spirit of the triune God  bless you with joy, anoint you with compassion, and send you in love. **Amen.**