

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany; February 13, 2022

+ Luke 6:17-26 +

“Think Like a Disciple”

**He went down with them and stood on a level place with a large crowd of his disciples and a large number of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, as well as from the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon. These people came to listen to him and to be healed of their diseases. Those who were troubled by unclean spirits were also cured. The whole crowd kept trying to touch him, because power was going out from him and healing them all.**

**He lifted up his eyes to his disciples and said:**

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

**Blessed are you who hunger now,  
because you will be satisfied.**

**Blessed are you who weep now,  
because you will laugh.**

**Blessed are you whenever people hate you,  
and whenever they exclude and insult you  
and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man.**

**“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy because of this: Your reward is great in heaven! The fact is, their fathers constantly did the same things to the prophets.”**

**But woe to you who are rich,  
because you are receiving your comfort now.**

**Woe to you who are well fed now,  
because you will be hungry.**

**Woe to you who laugh now,  
because you will be mourning and weeping.**

**Woe to you when all people speak well of you,  
because that is how their fathers constantly treated the false prophets.**

It is hard to understand exactly how to take the blessings and curses that Jesus speaks in Luke chapter 6. When Jesus says, “Woe to you who are well fed now, because you will be hungry,” how should I take that? What should I think about that? I am a well-fed American. Does that mean I’ll spend eternity in hell? When he says, “Blessed are you who are poor, because yours is the kingdom of God,” does that mean I’ll never get there? After all, I have a savings account and am probably among the richest 1% of human beings to ever live in this world.

The first reaction when hearing these words from the Son of God can be “uh-oh.” But the first thing to understand about this section of Luke’s Gospel is that Jesus isn’t speaking these words to everybody and anybody. He’s speaking only to his disciples. He teaching his followers how to think, how to see things like Christians.

Watch this: Jesus starts the day teaching all kinds of people: **He went down with them and stood on a level place with a large crowd of his disciples and a large number of people from all Judea and Jerusalem,**

as well as from the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon. These people came to listen to him and to be healed of their diseases. So Jesus begins by speaking to a large, diverse crowd. There a Jews and Gentiles. Presumably, old and young, male and female. They also have different agendas: some want to listen to Jesus, some want him to heal them, some maybe want both. And Jesus does teach them and heal them.

But then, suddenly, Jesus stops speaking to everyone. **He lifted up his eyes to his disciples and said...** What follows are eight statements that are paradoxes. Understanding that some of us here are giant nerds or English majors who understand perfectly well what a paradox is, I will beg their patience for the non-nerds and perhaps those who haven't spoken English their whole lives. A paradox, basically, is a statement that on the surface is not logical. At first glance, the statement contradicts itself and cannot be true.

Some paradoxes, however, have a key that unlocks them. For example, "Less is more," is absurd on its face. But it starts to make sense when you apply the principle that rest in the short term can lead to more output in the long run. That's the key that makes the statement work. "Spend money to make money," sounds crazy at first. But the key is to look at it the light of investing money. So, eventually, we will need a key to unlock these puzzling sayings of Christ.

Because Jesus – speaking to his disciples! – does lay the paradoxes on hard and heavy: **Blessed are you who are poor, because yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, because you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, because you will laugh. Blessed are you whenever people hate you, and whenever they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man.** It is all crazy on the surface: poverty is a kingdom. Hunger will be satisfaction. Weeping will be laughter. Hatred, exclusion, and insults get this reaction: **Rejoice in that day and leap for joy.**

And yet, Jesus' disciples accept these statements that sound impossible. You can be poor now and be the owner of a kingdom of infinite wealth. Because there is a reality you do not see now. There is a heavenly kingdom hidden from the view of our eyes. But it is real. And no matter what you have or do not have here, it belongs to you as Jesus' disciple.

Notice: some of the paradoxes are in the future; they will happen someday. But the first one is in the present. Dear poor disciple of Jesus: You are both poor right now and rich right now at the same time. Because the kingdom of God, although you do not see it now, belongs to you in the present tense.

And one day, poor disciple, you will see this kingdom that is for now hidden from you. And when you do, the rest of these paradoxes will kick in and make sense, too. The hunger you feel now will be satisfied. The tears you cry now will be laughter. The persecution you feel now for your faith will be rewarded.

These first four statements are called, "Beatitudes", because they all begin with the phrase, "Blessed are you." Jesus' disciples are blessed, even when the present reality is poverty, hunger, mourning and persecution. We are blessed because there is another reality. There is a kingdom of God that belongs to us now. And we will get there. When we do, all problems will be pleasure. This is the way a disciple of Jesus thinks.

The next four statements Jesus makes are not Beatitudes. Instead of beginning with the phrase "Blessed are you," they all start with "Woe to you." But these statements are paradoxes, too. They place a curse on any disciple who falls into the trap of thinking the way the world does: that now is all there is. The reality we see here and now is all that matters; there's no kingdom that's hidden from us now. You can hear the attitude of "here and now only" in the way Jesus speaks: **But woe to you who are rich, because**

**you are receiving your comfort now. Woe to you who are well fed now...Woe to you who laugh now.** God often blesses his disciples with riches now, plenty of food now, laughter now. But when his people see only now and not the kingdom to come, the blessings becoming curses.

So then why does Jesus go so dark with his disciples? Because when his people see only now and not the kingdom to come, the blessings become curses. You lose sight of the hidden kingdom and the glory to come. Here and now become your god. Why does he speak woes to his own followers? Because his disciples think this way too much. Even a little is too much, but we do it more than a little.

When we experience poverty, hunger, or sorrow now we are to remember the reality that heaven is ours and that one day we will see the kingdom, satisfied and delighted. But thinking in any terms other than “now” is hard. And it is getting harder all the time. We expect to have what we order now. It should be on our porch the next day, if not sooner. If I see a shelf empty and I’m told I have to wait for the next shipment, it’s a crisis. Yes, there may be forty other brands of water, but I want Aquafina and I want it now! The desires of instant gratification take hold of us so hard and fast, and we expect to have what we want now. Waiting and trusting that good things will come in time becomes harder and harder. The desire for every good thing right now grows and grips.

And this is the paradox: if you live for now, if you think for now, you are likely to get your get good things now. But now and here will be your god, your highest good. And the future glory you could not wait will give way to hunger, mourning, and weeping.

Jesus speaks to his disciples and tells them to think like this: Now is not all there is. Think about the kingdom to come, and when now is not what you want it to be, know the kingdom is already yours. And you will one day see the full reality, and be fully blessed in every way.

But here we still are. Now. Here. Surrounded by the now of this world. We hear Jesus tell us how to think, but what makes us think this way? He does. He is the one who causes shallow, now-obsessed sinners to listen and accept the paradox that because the kingdom is ours we are blessed even as we struggle, hunger and weep. And he is the one lifts our eyes off of living for what we want here and now to look ahead to that kingdom.

About thirty years ago, a thirty-five year old Christian named Sylvia Dunstan was diagnosed with a rare and untreatable liver cancer. In the closing months of her life, she wrote a hymn called Christus Paradox:

You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd.  
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.  
You, peacemaker and swordbringer  
Of the way you took and gave.  
You the everlasting instant;  
You, whom we both scorn and crave.

Clothed in light upon the mountain,  
Stripped of might upon the cross,  
Shining in eternal glory,  
Beggar’d by a soldier’s toss,  
You, the everlasting instant;  
You, who are both gift and cost.

You, who walk each day beside us,  
Sit in power at God's side.  
You, who preach a way that's narrow,  
Have a love that reaches wide.  
You, the everlasting instant;  
You, who are our pilgrim guide.

Worthy is our earthly Jesus!  
Worthy is our cosmic Christ!  
Worthy your defeat and vict'ry.  
Worthy still your peace and strife.  
You, the everlasting instant;  
You, who are our death and life.  
Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.  
You, who are our death and our life.

On some level, would you consider strange for a thirty-five-year-old dying of a rare form of cancer to write "Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia"? Does that make no sense on the surface? Could we call that a paradox? How could she do it? Because her Savior is the divine Paradox, as her hymn so beautifully expresses. Jesus is Son of God and Son of Man, all glory and all humility, the one who knew no sin and became sin for us on the cross. He's the one whose death brings life, the one who walks with us and simultaneously sits beside the Father. He is, in Ms. Dunstan's words, "our death and life."

Jesus is the divine Paradox. But like most paradoxes, there is a key that makes sense of it all. And that key is faith, worked by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is thoroughly paradoxical. But then the Spirit works through the gospel, and even a little child says, "I get it. Jesus loves me and saves me." Faith is the key.

**He lifted up his eyes to his disciples and said...** It is to those with faith that Jesus speaks these blessings that on the surface make no sense. It is those with faith that Jesus then warns with woes. By faith we accept the Son of God and Son of Man. We accept by faith the one who is pure glory and pure humility, the one who dies to bring life, the one who reigns above and walks with us.

And, through faith in him, we accept that there is a reality that is different than what we see. Even when we are poor, the kingdom of God is ours now. And so one day we will be nothing but satisfied, and filled with laughter. He lifts our eyes off of the now and look ahead to the kingdom. This is how Jesus' disciples think. In him, it makes perfect sense. Amen.