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The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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You may have heard a dictum that is often directed at ordained folks – we are to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. “Well the lessons for today certainly resonate with that intention.

We heard Jeremiah talking about curses and blessings – “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord”, as opposed to “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.”

Psalm 1 is a parallel statement – “Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful ... They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed. I, the Lord, test the mind and search the heart, to give all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.” Blesses and curses – oh my!

Jeremiah gives us a way to connect God's ways in the Old Testament with what we hear from Jesus - letting us know that God is God throughout time and our God is the one to trust in all things – in other words Jesus didn't just make this stuff up – His words are the words of God from the beginning.

Moving to the reading from Luke, Luke keeps us on the same train of thought as Jeremiah and the Psalm. Jesus gives a sermon to his newly chosen disciples, and this sermon is very similar to what is called the Sermon on the Mount found in the Gospel of Matthew. This rendering of the sermon is called the Sermon on the Plain, or sometimes the Sermon on the level place.

Before Jesus gives his sermon, we are told he comes down from the mountain and is surrounded by huge crowds, a great multitude of people. The first thing that Jesus does is heal the people and cast out unclean spirits. As he healed people, before he began to speak, the people saw and felt the power that came from him; a power so strong that all in the crowd tried to touch him, and, we are told, all were healed. These crowds must have been in a pretty positive mindset at this point, seeing that all were healed. I imagine there was some celebrating going on.

In the midst of all of this, Jesus, looking at his disciples, began to talk to the disciples about blessings and what in the Sermon on the Mount, were labeled curses. These words of Jesus may have caused confusion and consternation.

We need to remember that in this ancient world the operating system for society was an honor – shame system. Honor was the prevailing attribute in that society.

Honor included things like wealth, position, fame, outstanding reputation, receiving honors, holding public offices. One's family needed to maintain the family's honor. If honor was lost, all was lost. It was shameful to be poor, to be an outcast, to have disease. If one lost honor, the entire family lost

honor. Although very difficult, it was possible to regain honor for men. Not so for women. If honor were lost, it could not be regained by a woman.

So now here comes Jesus telling those of this society that blessings rest with the poor, with those who weep, with those hated by others, with those cut off from society, seen as “less than”, reviled, or poorly born. And on top of that Jesus’ calls out those of “honor” as not receiving blessings. While Jesus doesn’t exactly say they are cursed, in Luke’s version of the sermon Jesus cautions the esteemed folks with a “woe”. Here is Jesus, turning things upside down. Woe to the rich.

Woe to those who do not know hunger. Woe to those who have no reason to weep. What does this mean for the rich, and the poor for that matter.

Let us take a minute to look at the meaning of the words blessed and woe. We tend to think that someone who is blessed is happy and is someone who has all that they need. When we look at the Greek word for blessed as described in Strong’s Lexicon– Makarios- it can mean happy, but it can also mean a state of spiritual wellbeing, a deep abiding joy and contentment that comes from a right relationship with God; to describe someone living in accordance with God’s will; those who are favored by God and know God’s Grace. This is so much more than just being happy!

And what about woe? It is not a substitute for cursed, but is used as a way to tell someone that what follows is really important and they better pay attention.

Rather like saying uh oh!, or yikes!

Adam Phillips of the podcast “The Witness”, describes the use of woe thus: “Woe” is their cue to perk up and listen closely, because what follows is often a critical message that they can’t afford to ignore. The prophets used “woe” to announce God’s judgment on injustice and evil. It is not so much about punishing as it is about correcting course – like a divine intervention to steer people back on track. Along with judgment, “woe” carries a plea for change. It is that urgent nudge to ditch the bad stuff and make things right again. It can be a call to repentance. And, woe can be an expression of lament: Sometimes, “woe” is the raw outpouring of grief. Picture it as the tears of God, shed over a broken world and the pain His children go through. “

It seems to me it is pretty clear about the blessings part. As one commentator (Peter Eaton) put it “Our God is the God of those who have nothing but God”. Our God has a penchant for providing for and protecting the poor and disenfranchised.

The harder part is making sense of those to whom woe falls. Think of us, here today. Is it bad that we have enough? Are we doomed to be called to task for being able to laugh?

I don’t see it that way. I think it comes to how we use what we have and how we treat the disadvantaged and one another. I believe it calls us to treat caring for one another as a sacred obligation. It calls us to live into our Baptismal vows. It calls us to be aware of how we think and act. If our actions and thinking are not congruent with God’s, we can change for the better.

I was caught by something I read the other day that really made me think about these blessings and woes.

This may be where the “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” comes in. The article I was reading was discussing the war on diversity, equity and inclusion. The author, Robert P. Jones, wrote about it being said that diversity, equity and inclusion was the reason a plane crashed or was the reason for the poor response to the California fires. He also wrote about an attorney general who is suing a national coffee company because

“their workforce is today “more female and less white” than it was in 2020. In the lawsuit, The AG incredulously claims—again with no evidence—that this workforce shift has forced consumers in his state to “pay higher prices and wait longer for goods and services,” because DEI programs “skew the hiring pool towards people who are less qualified to perform their work”.

Another of my readings revealed that a prominent wealthy person called the people who require assistance parasites. These are but two examples of things being said and acted upon in our country today. In my mind, these examples of current schools of thought definitely belong in the woe’s column.

These positions are not in keeping with what Jesus is telling us is God’s desire for God’s Kingdom.

We are living in difficult, tumultuous times. We are living with and in deep disagreements about what is right and proper. When we look at the blessings and woes Jesus lays out here, we may have to decide which affect us as individuals and as community. On the whole we are safe, comfortable people. Yet even in our mostly comfortable circumstances we need to ask if our life circumstances place us in the laughing or weeping category. If we were living on the street, with nowhere to go, which category would we be in? This really takes some thought and self-examination doesn’t it?

And what is our responsibility as children of a loving God to intervene in recognized inequities as we are able, where we are able.

This sermon from Jesus to the disciples, to the church, to us, shows us God’s desire for God’s children. It calls us to be mindful of how we use our blessings as we interact with those for whom God desires good. It would seem that God desires that no one is hungry, no one is poor, disregarded, maltreated. As we will hear next week, when we get the rest of the story, Luke 6: 35 tells us that “You will be children of the most high: for He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as the Father is merciful.” Our God is full of grace and mercy and Jesus is telling us what God’s Kingdom can look like; How God means it to be for all of God’s children.

Let us commit ourselves to work to turn our woes into blessings so that we can be the change agents that God desires for God’s kingdom. In closing I share with you part of an affirmation of faith used at the service yesterday to honor Absolom Jones and The Rt. Reverend Barbara Harris:

Will you proclaim the good news of the risen Christ, God’s word of hope and reconciliation in word and deed, to those to whom Christ will send you?

Will you care for God’s creation with wisdom and reverence, sharing freely of the gifts God has given?

Will you serve Christ in all persons, in those with whom you agree and disagree, loving you neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive to build God's reign, the beloved community of justice and righteousness, working to ring peace to the human family?

Will you be the voice of those who have no voice, the spirit of those whose spirit is broken and the messenger of hope for those sitting in despair?

Will you seek to mend what is broken by human sin and greed, and look for Christ in those who suffer at the hand of others?

Our job then is to "go forth into the world to stand up, speak out and live into the reign of Christ our savior."

AMEN