



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 6 Year C

Joining the Saints

[RCL]: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Consider your condition in life. Are you relatively well off financially? Are you secure, with an abundance of material possessions? Do you often eat out, sometimes in expensive restaurants? Do you have a comfortable home? Do you enjoy life? Are you well thought of in your church, neighborhood, and community? Do you have a lot to look forward to?

Probably the answer to these questions is “Yes. Yes, I am secure, well fed, well thought of, and well off, with a future of hope and promise.”

Now, consider others in your community and the world – those who live in other neighborhoods. Are any of them poor, hungry, grieving, hated, excluded, reviled?

Of course, we all know people like that and consider them extremely unfortunate. Happy are we. Unhappy are they.

At least that is the common view. But fantasize for a moment. Imagine your bishop gathering the unfortunates of your diocese and telling them: “Are you ever lucky! How blessed you are to have such poverty and grief and misery in your lives.” Most of us would think the bishop had gone crazy. Such a conclusion, however, must take into account the message of today’s gospel reading.

Jesus, as he so often did, confounded popular wisdom. The Lord looked to the kind of people whom we pity, who seem hopeless, and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, who are hungry, who weep. Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you, and defame you.”

Then, even more astonishingly, Jesus looked to another group of people who are like most of us – who seem to have it made – and said, “Woe to you who are rich, who are full, and who are laughing. Woe to you when all speak well of you.” Woe to the likes of us, for he says we are subject to great sorrow – to grief and misery.

What Jesus is really saying to us is “Watch out!! For your seeming blessedness is in truth a great danger.”

How can this be? Do we not ask with bewilderment, “What in the world is going on here? Doesn’t Jesus have it all upside down? If the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the hated, the excluded, and the reviled are the happy ones, how are we to understand this? How can we long to be poor? How can we see being hated as a positive value? Does Jesus really mean that hunger and grief will improve our lot? Why would we honor being poor? Don’t we use our wealth to serve God’s purposes? Could we not do more for our neighbors if we had more with which to help them?”

How do we answer these inevitable questions? Let’s begin by understanding that in using these sayings, these “blessed”s and “woe”s, Jesus is not glamorizing poverty and suffering. He is not calling us to go slumming or make ourselves sick or weak. No, there is something much deeper and more important in his message.

Jesus doesn’t want us to see disability of one sort or another as a magical cure for what ails us. Surely he knew as well as we know that poverty can lead to despair and suicide, to crime and violence. But he also knew, as we must learn, that need can lead us to God. Poverty and hunger and despair can provide a beginning for one seeking unity with God.

He added the “woe”s because he knew that most people like us would have a hard time imagining that being poor could help a person. Jesus focused on the very things that most of us work and hope and pray for. So he listed them as woeful and miserable to get our attention. He knew that being well fed, happy, and well thought of is what we really seek – as we smile all the way to the shopping mall or bank.

Above all, he knew that purchasing material possessions, and buying insurance, and setting aside savings for retirement or rainy days would lead us to imagine ourselves as safe and secure and in control of our lives. He knew that people like us stand constantly in danger of assuming, consciously or subconsciously, that we can work our way into happiness or buy our way into joy and peace.

It is far too easy for us to believe we are powerful enough or independent enough to provide everything we could ever need. With the kinds of resources and abilities most of us have, we are in danger of forgetting that we need anything – especially a savior. And in so forgetting, we fail to let God fully into our hearts.

What Jesus knew is that the most likely way for us to turn to God is when we are in danger and difficulty. Then, we may knock on the door that God will open. Then, we may find a savior to befriend us.

It is so much easier to welcome God into our lives when we know our sin and our spiritual bankruptcy. We will know our absolute need for what Christ can offer, and that we cannot produce for ourselves. How blessed – how enviable – how lucky are those who understand their urgent need for the resources that only God can provide and that they may have simply for the asking.

Through these “blessed”s and “woe”s, Jesus calls us to join the spirit of the poor whom he addressed so long ago. Those have-nots of the first century of whom Jesus spoke had nothing to expect from the world, but they had everything to expect from God.

It is through their need that Jesus shows us the way to look toward God, to turn to God for help in our lives and in our attitudes and in our values. If we can recognize our need we can begin to learn where God leads us. We can understand the necessity of seeking God. Our deep sense of helplessness brings us before God just as we are – not as we imagine ourselves to be. We can recognize the power of God that can transform us into the happy, complete, caring and loving people Jesus calls us to be.

The poor can help us get to that glorious day when we will give up on seeking personal resources of privilege or power as the path to true happiness. The poor of Jesus’ time turned to God who cared, who healed and uplifted – who, above all, loved them as they were. Their story can teach us that the love of God is gently close at hand and powerful far beyond those who rule this world. The poor can help us see the need for a power greater than ourselves to heal us and give us happiness and meaning. They help us come to the day when we will see clearly the source of this power: Jesus, the Christ, our Savior.

And on that day, we will join with the saints of all ages as we “rejoice and leap for joy.”

This sermon, written by the Rev. Ken Kesselus, originally ran for Epiphany 6 (C) in 2007.

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