

## Sermon Text – Sunday, February 16, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Jeremiah 17:5-10; 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: I Corinthians 15:12-20  
Scripture for Message: Luke 6:17-26**

It is commonly accepted that Jesus' ministry and message changed things – changed lives then. In addition, his message continues to change lives for over two-thousand years. What we have read from Luke's gospel this morning represents a notable change to well-established ways of thinking about what it means to be a follower of Jesus – then and now. “Gone is the image of the God of strength and power who identifies with the influential, who blesses the privileged, and whose presence is signaled by riches and political strength.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus' “Sermon on the Plain” represents a topsy-turvy view of living in the kingdom.

Luke, in many ways, presents Jesus as a man of the people, with the people. In this version of Jesus' famous sermon Luke has Jesus standing on a level place with a great crowd of followers. This is important because it demonstrates that Jesus did not place himself above the people, Jesus met them and meets us where we are. Jesus speaks directly to them and to us, showing us the path to salvation and walking with us on that path. Luke further tells us that Jesus looked up at his disciples when he began to teach. Maybe Jesus sat at that time, or maybe he was on his knees ministering to the sick – a position of humble stature not one of pride or arrogance.

Notice too those who were present in the crowds, people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon – this was a diverse group of people, both Jews and Gentiles. It is an illustration that Jesus included ALL in his ministry which, for some of the Jewish religious leaders, was a rearrangement of beliefs. In their minds the Messiah was for them alone; to rescue them alone, but Jesus turns those expectations around. This Messiah is not exclusive to any one group but inclusive of all who turn to him.

Luke's version of Jesus' sermon is different from Matthew's and maybe that is because Luke presents Jesus among us, Emmanuel God with us. So, we need to look at what Jesus is saying to his followers. With one exception Jesus talks about what will happen as a response to present circumstances. He talks about rewards in the future except this statement, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Jesus is offering guidance, teaching, and healing from the space where his followers were located. Most of those present were living in poverty, under oppressive conditions. His words were reassuring and encouraging to them that the kingdom included them now.

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Errickson. “Luke 16:17-26 – Theological Perspective” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol 1. Chap 1-11*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. WJK. 2014. Print. 158-162.

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Jesus makes some statements that flipped societal norms, blessed are you who hunger now for you will be filled, you who weep now for you will laugh but woe to the rich for you have received your consolation, woe to those who are full now for you will be hungry, woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. In my mind, Jesus makes a distinction between those who are satisfied with the way things are and those who live in poverty, under Roman rule, and wanting to see things change. His statements remind them and us that things will change and if you are happy now those changes may come as a woe for you. But notice Jesus says your reward is great in heaven, not necessarily of this world. The rewards this world would offer will change.

This could be Jesus' reminder that the people could not, we cannot, look past the poor and needy – Jesus is standing in the way, standing with them so that when we look to Jesus, we must see them as well. Because Jesus knows what it is like for the world to cast him out and on society's margins, God is uniquely able to identify with the outcast and marginalized. "The God who died a criminal's death is the very God who is present with the poor, needy, and marginalized."<sup>2</sup> Those of us who live affluent lives, who are full now and laughing now need to realize that all of that is fleeting and someday the circumstances might be reversed. Help others now because someday they will be us.

Jeremiah's message is similar, trust in mere mortals leaves one like a shrub in a desolate landscape with nothing to support you. Trusting in worldly things pulls us further and further away from Jesus. Jeremiah, as he gives the people the Lord's words, tells us – "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord." I wonder what that means as we consider Jesus' message. Jesus has explained to his followers that current circumstances will change – only God is eternal. His words as he teaches his disciples, this is what we read from Luke's Gospel, are clear in that message.

So, what does this mean to the church or even to us as individuals? I wonder if it informs us of a path to a deeper relationship with Christ or how to depend on Christ's presence for our strength and comfort. Is Jesus' message for us, or can we just ignore it as ancient advice, or push it off as something for people who are not us? I wonder if Jesus might be reminding even us to not get too comfortable with the way things are because things will change. Jesus has come to change the order of things, to "heal" or save the world. That is one way to look at the salvation Jesus offers – as a balm to heal our present circumstances.

We have seen in our world a turning around of things, circumstances that have historically been stable and trustworthy are no longer that. Places where we build the foundations of our lives will crumble. Banks fail and money loses its

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<sup>2</sup> IBID

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value, people let us down. Even the forces of nature can somehow turn fortunes around. I recall standing on a deck in front of my mobile home in Kentucky and watching a tornado pass over my blighted neighborhood only to hit the brick homes of well-to-do families a couple of miles away. We have all seen the destruction of fires in California, not giving any preferential consideration to rich or poor. The hurricanes in the south as well throw everything into chaos regardless of wealth or status. You see, circumstances will change, the world and the forces of nature do not discriminate.

When some of us hear Jesus' sermon we tend to focus only on the blessings and claim them for ourselves, we tend to rationalize our circumstances. We don't want to admit that often we fit better into the category of woes – we are full now, we are better off in this region than in many other regions of the world. Most of us are comfortable and not living under oppressive conditions and most of us are not among the marginalized – although we might be victims of ageism. Face it, we live in an affluent society and benefit from that affluence if not individually, certainly collectively. Absolutely nothing wrong with that – except we need to realize that all that can change. Jesus talks about reversals of fortune and power. Jesus' message, Jeremiah's message reminds us that human ways are transitory only God's ways are eternal.

So, if this message and its woes do not make you uncomfortable maybe you aren't taking it seriously enough. It should compel us to follow Jesus in ministry and support to those who might be experiencing woes now. Jesus reminds us that our positions and our current circumstances are never stable – everything is subject to change. If this message makes us uncomfortable, we can find comfort by anticipating the blessings we will receive as we meet others according to their needs and not our own. Our Christian lives begin with ministry.

It is, however, important to realize that our comfort does not lie in whether we are rich or successful and God does not punish with poverty or oppression. We cannot be confident that our worth or the meaning of our lives depends on anything the world can provide. "The source of our comfort and hope is not medical, humanist, or technological it is Christological." "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord." Luke reminds us that we find comfort with Jesus who stands with us.

In my mind what all of this points to is the fact, as I mentioned earlier, that Jesus changes things. God is doing something new in the world. One of my favorite passages of scripture comes from Isaiah 43:18-19 "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." Jesus – the perfect union of God with humanity – begins God's new

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creation on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus reminds us now that good times are ahead for those who live faithfully, enduring present circumstances.

The thing the church and individuals in it need to realize is that we are God's instruments in transforming woes to blessings. Jesus began a change that has persisted over two-thousand years and now we are the body of Christ, the hands, and feet of those who carry the good news to the ones who need to hear it. We are the hands and feet of those who can transform the world. Yes, Jesus did say that we would always have the poor, but I don't think that was Jesus' way of saying we don't need to try to change the circumstances that create poverty. More likely it was Jesus' way of saying there would always be opportunities for Christians to work toward transforming our world into a world with more blessings than woes.

“Jesus' blessings and woes are specific and daunting. They can make us reconsider how we have ordered and understood our world – and how to amplify compassion and generosity.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus certainly knew what struggles his followers would face, he certainly knew that those who were hungry now would be fed and those who were full now would face hunger. Jesus certainly knew that there would be reversals of fortune and power – we have seen that and experienced that throughout all generations. His message for us is to anticipate the inevitable changes in blessings and woes and draw comfort not from human things but from Christ alone, for surely your reward is great in heaven. Our response must be to follow Jesus in ministry with gratitude and praise traveling along the winding, dangerous road that leads to a world full of compassion.

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<sup>3</sup> Ed Horstmann. “In the Lectionary - February 16: Sixth Sunday after Epiphany” *The Christian Century* February 2025. Print. 26