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Woe! Whoa!

Wait a minute- what's this reading from Luke all about? It's not the nice, relatively happy-clappy version we are used to from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 5. Who is this Jesus that calls down woe upon those gathered to hear him preach?

This Jesus is the Jesus of the Temple – overturning tables and letting sacrificial creatures go free from human greed. This Jesus is the one who doesn't pull any punches but rather calls us out in blunt words about our habit of turning away from God when life goes well. This Jesus reminds us that when we think we are responsible for all the good in our lives, that we are the reason we are healthy, wealthy and wise, we are sadly off course. This Jesus is the one who preaches from the plain – the level place – and not the mountain which puts some distance between us and Jesus.

In Luke's gospel Jesus is among us, at our level. Jesus is not separated from us by geography but rather moves among us, like us in the dirt and dust and press of people in a crowd. We're told that "all in the crowd are trying to touch him, for power came out of him and healed all of them" (v. 19).

And into the midst of this crowd, into the midst of healing of minds, bodies and souls, Jesus speaks.

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 (v. 20-21).

Not so different than the Beatitudes found in the Gospel of Matthew. Blessed are you. Fortunate are you. Happy are you. Rejoice, enjoy. But unlike Matthew, Luke does not add "in spirit" – Matthew says "blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt. 5:3). Luke says, blessed are the poor. Luke means the really poor- the ones who have no food to eat or shelter over their heads or who have no money to buy medical care. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, these are the ones who are at the bottom of the pyramid. They do not have the basic necessities of life. All of their time and efforts are spent trying to get the things that we gathered here take for granted. They are the ones who cannot look long term because they are focused on gathering enough for the day and worried that they won't even get that much.

I'm reminded of the situation in Venezuela where inflation and other factors have resulted in such poverty for so many that a full day's wages, when you can find a job that pays to begin with, enables you to buy 2 eggs. That's it- 2 eggs for your whole family and no more. It's estimated that people have lost an average of 24 pounds per person due to the food shortages. No wonder people are fleeing and seeking somewhere else where they can work, find shelter and

¹ https://joelkime.com/2015/04/22/why-jesus-says-the-poor-are-blessed-luke-6_17-26/

food. It's estimated that at least 10% of the country has left seeking a better life.² If this were happening here in the United States that would mean at least 3,217,000 people would have left this country.³ Jesus is speaking to these people: people who do not have enough food in the here and now in physical form. Yes, he's also speaking to people who are poor in spirit – but he brings the lessons home in more direct and immediate ways in the Gospel of Luke.

When I am so focused on finding food for my body, in finding shelter from the storms, in finding medical help for my broken bones, I have no energy or interest in anything else in this life. If I have faith in a loving God I'm likely crying out – where are you God? Where are you as I watch my children cry and see their malnourished bodies and fear the rain and the cold and the fevers that follow. Who are you, God, that you let this happen?

Jesus doesn't stop with telling those in this situation to “rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is in heaven.” No, God, I need help now but I look all around and see no help. What good are you God if you let this suffering exist and if you let the children die?

Jesus doesn't stop with telling people to endure the hardships of this life because they will be rewarded in heaven – in the bye and bye. Jesus goes on to remind us who have much that we will face God's wrath if we remain oblivious to the needs of others.

Jesus says:

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 (v. 24-26).

Jesus warns us that our focus on earthly treasures and not on God has consequences. We are reminded of “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:21). When God is our focus, then we will see and we will care for those who are poor, those who are hungry, those who are naked or sick or in prison or those whose basic needs are not met.

A few years ago we read Toxic Charity by Robert Lupton⁴. We are still considering the learnings from that book as Outreach considers where we give money. We look for opportunities that will help people grow into more responsible and self-fulfilled persons with this giving. We look for programs that will help people be more self-aware and self-reliant and less dependent upon handouts rather than hand-ups. Yes, we give money. As Lupton writes: “Little affirms human dignity more than honest work. One of the surest ways to destroy self-worth is subsidizing the idleness of able-bodied people. Work is a gift, a calling, a human responsibility” (p.152). We hope we encourage a turn-around in mindset through the charities and programs to which we give our money, time and talent.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/11/08/million-venezuelans-have-fled-their-country-according-new-un-estimate/?utm_term=.97f43ccef738

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https://www.google.com/search?q=population+of+united+states+2018&rlz=1C1CHWA_enUS617US618&oq=population+of+United&aqs=chrome.3.0j69i57j0l4.5889j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

⁴ New York: HarperOne, 2012.

If we can, by our giving, help even one person who has been dependent upon the government for hand-outs, grow into a self-sufficient member of society, then we have done the Lord's work. And it is the Lord's work. We are the hands and feet but it is the Lord's work in that person that makes the difference.

This holds true even when it is our time and effort given to help and not simply money. Sometimes listening to someone who is facing a crisis, or being a mentor or a CASA is a way to help break the cycle of poverty or abuse or whatever the circumstances are that brought a person to grief. We are called to be the body of Christ to others, recognizing that we have a role to play but it is God who works the miracles of a turned-around life.

Woe to you who retreat into your safe and warm house and do not see or will not help those in the cold. Woe to you who say "it is somebody's else's job" – that's what I pay taxes for. Woe to you who do not keep God front and center in your life and in your decision making, for you have received your consolation in this life.

And joy to you who see and who act, in big ways and in small, to help our brothers and sisters in need. God has given you gifts to be used for the glory of God and to bring the realm of God here to earth.

Jesus concludes his sermon on the plain with these words:

But I say to you who listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you (v. 27-31).

And there you have it. The Gospel – the good news of God in Jesus Christ. Is it easy? No, of course not. If we could understand all that Jesus says, Jesus would not be God. Is it something to strive for – to keep God front and center in my mind and in all that I do and say? Can I do this? Yes, with God's help. Join me on this journey and experience the love of God and the fellowship of all who follow the Christ to bring God's realm to earth, here and now. **Amen.**