

February 17, 2019

TEXT: Luke 6:17–26

TITLE: Reversal of Fortunes

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

Augustine is reported to have pointed out that “preaching involves three things: teaching, delighting and moving. A sermon ought to be fresh, relevant if it is to teach us something; to be delightful in order to make us feel alive, for without God’s grace we are dead; and to move us to turn to God.” (*Toknuboh Adeyemo, Africa Bible Commentary; A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars, 12410*). Without those three elements, a sermon is merely something to be endured. I might add that sermons also have to be theologically sound, occasionally radical, and spoken in love. Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, as this passage is referred to, has all of those elements. It is radical, relevant, enlivens, is spoken in love and moves people closer to God.

Jesus had been about the business of healing the sick and infirmed, responding to questions raised by the religious authorities, and now he has ascended up the mountain to pray. After communing with God all night in prayer, in the morning light Jesus chooses his twelve disciples and they all descend down the mountain side to a level place where a great crowd is assembled. Everyone had come to hear Jesus and to be healed of their physical, emotion and spiritual diseases. Jesus’ reputation had preceded him. Luke states that power flowed from Jesus, healing everyone in the crowd. When we are physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, or financially infirmed it’s difficult to hear the truth, or live into the Good News of the gospel. Healing everyone was imperative, if they were to receive the counter-cultural message Jesus was about to deliver.

Jesus begins to teach. 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 and defame you. Rejoice, leap for joy, for surely great is your reward in heaven. (Luke 6: 20–22) This is a major policy shift and statement regarding the Kingdom of God. That which Jesus earlier proclaimed in the synagogue in Nazareth that he had been sent by God to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind, is now made plain for everyone to understand. People the world characterize as worthless, unimportant, inconsequential, God calls relevant, and blessed. Jesus’ pronouncement must have come as a shock to the religious right of his day, the wealthy, educated and ruling class, and likewise to those who were powerless and socially dispossessed. A reversal of fortune is in our future, and things are about to get interesting.

Jesus’ proclamation in Luke was so unsettling and contrary that the Gospel of Matthew sought to spiritualize and domesticate the pronouncement in the Sermon on the Mount by stating: blessed are the poor *in spirit* and blessed those who hunger and thirst after *righteousness*, in order to make the message comfortable for those who weren’t or aren’t financially poor or physically hungry, for those who don’t solely lean and depend on God, but who are self-sufficient, think that they have all the answers and that they

set the bar. Yes, we often justify ourselves by thinking we are all poor in spirit, hungry and thirsting for that which is right and just. But Jesus wasn't speaking spiritually or metaphorically in the Gospel of Luke. He's speaking of people who are physically hungry, people who are financially poor, people who are emotionally sad, people who have nothing but God to place their hope and trust in—theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is instructive, interesting and relevant that Jesus and his disciples came down from the mountain and stood on level ground with the people. Jesus came to the people on the plain and met them where they were, speaking *plainly* and sharing that in due time they would be elevated. God calls us to come down from our high places, our ivory towers and palaces of superiority and complacency to walk with people who are on the ground. God calls us to give of our time, talent and treasure; to serve one another despite and because of our differences; to accompany the sick, the infirmed, the income insufficient, the hungry, the homeless; to comfort those who are mourning, broken, abused, violated, or imprisoned—not because we have it all together, but because we have so much to give by emptying ourselves of our preconceived notions, feelings of self-importance, self-centeredness, and self-proclaimed humbleness and embody God's grace, God's unmerited favor given freely to all.

We often get it twisted. In antiquity and modernity, Christians think that being in Christ means living trouble-free lives of material and financial blessings. Jesus addressed that mentality in his sermon by stating: woe to those who are rich now, for you have received your consolation; woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry; woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep; and woe when all speak well of you, for that is what your ancestors did to the false prophets. That's a hard message to hear, much less believe, especially when we glory in and depend on our financial and creature comforts on this side of heaven.

Prayerfully, we haven't fallen into the trap of allowing wealth and power to isolate us from others who are less fortunate. Because doing so separates us from God. Now, the Bible has many examples of wealthy individuals who were faithful to God: Zacchaeus the tax collector; Barnabas, who sold his field and brought the money to the apostles that no one would have need; and Lydia, a dealer of purple cloth. But we are also aware of the warning that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. We must remain vigilant to not allow our possessions to become our gods.

Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez commented that *“God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God's agapeic love.”* (Gustavo Gutierrez, 'Songs and Deliverance,' in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) 131.) While, Commentator, Peter Eaton, states: *“Our God is the God of those who have*

nothing but God. That includes us too, even if our need of God is masked in part by our comparative prosperity.”

Beloved, God’s love is radically, universal for all, but it is often the poor, downtrodden, marginalized and disposed who seek after God’s grace and mercy most diligently.

Augustine stated that preaching involves three things: teaching, delighting and moving. Jesus taught that day on the plain that to be a follower of God was a counter-cultural experience. The world’s values have no relevance in the Kingdom of God, other than to be used for the good of all. Jesus delighted the disposed and disenfranchised by proclaiming: blessed are all who are denied, diminished and disregarded; blessed are all who are victimized by systems of injustice, inequality and inequity; blessed are all who society has deemed powerless, voiceless, irrelevant and shut out. And Jesus preached to disturb, disrupt and move the comfortable when he proclaimed: woe to those who have the power, authority, position and agency to make a difference, but don’t; and woe to those who are complicit, comfortable, complacent, but chose not to move on behalf of the marginalized, and the disinherited.

Beloved, in the economy of God, we are all on level ground when the last become first, the weak become strong, the poor become rich and justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. Jesus has told us how to live faithfully, fruitfully and fully and we cannot say or pretend we haven’t been advised that a reversal of fortunes is in our future. May it be so and may we be moved. Amen.