

January 17, 2019

Epiphany 6 Luke 6:17-26

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### **“Blessed are We”**

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

I grew up in a less than conventional style household. I was left to make the majority of my childhood decision on my own. I had no idea how the world really worked, but I was mostly free to figure that out on my own. But, from time to time, my great aunt Nora would visit...she would swoop in and try to get a handle on us seemingly independent children. I still recall some of the “rules” that she would lay out for us.

It wasn't uncommon to hear her say: “You have to go to bed before 9 so that you are rested for school” or “you've got to wear the ugly purple sweater that I gave you for Christmas – if you don't you'll catch pneumonia.” When supper time would come, I recall her often exclaiming: “Eat your corn or you'll get sick and die.” And of course, before many meals she would have to tell me specifically: “You cannot eat three chocolate bars – if you do you will get fat.” In hindsight, I probably should have listened to her – as I've got quite an investment of chocolate bars packed into this little body.

The point is, none of us liked being told what to do, but my siblings somehow recognized that behind her nagging squeal, Aunt Nora was a woman who genuinely wanted what was best for us. But unlike them, I really struggled to see Aunt Nora's love. In my eyes – Aunt Nora was a mean and controlling monster who wanted to keep us from the good things in life. The best TV shows seemed to only be on after Aunt Nora put us to bed and chocolate bars taste so good – so why shouldn't we be able to enjoy as many of them as we want?

My siblings could see that my Aunt Nora was acting out of love, but not me - I could not see her love because I was so caught up in what appeared to be unfair rules.

Likewise, one might read today's gospel text through a similar set of lenses. Luke recounts that Jesus chooses his 12 disciples and then proceeds to a level place where he offers them a sermon that sounds somewhat similar to Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount. Scholarship is uncertain if Luke and Matthew are recounting the same occurrence, or if Jesus had perhaps preached the same sermon on multiple occasions. Either way, it is clear that the teachings in today's gospel are an important part of Christ's message. And when I encounter the sort of direct interactions with Jesus that we see in today's text, I like to explore the context in which Jesus is speaking from. It's interesting to note that Luke describes the place in which Jesus is standing as a “level place.” This might be interpreted as flat plain or as a level spot upon a mountain, and either of those interpretations might be an accurate representation of the

physical space in which Jesus was speaking from, but there is also a tremendous amount of symbolism that is associated with “level” places.

Ronald Allen, a professor at the Indianapolis Christian Theological Seminary, notes that in scripture, and especially in the gospel of Luke: “the word “level” often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning.”<sup>1</sup> Level places then, symbolically represent places of life’s challenges and sufferings.

In today’s text, Jesus is speaking to us and to his disciples from this symbolic perspective of suffering, pain, and injustice. It’s from this perspective that we hear him say:

“Blessed are you who are hungry – for you will be filled.  
Blessed are you who weep now – for you will laugh.  
Blessed are you when people hate, exclude, revile, and defame you  
on account of the Son of Man – for your reward is great in heaven.”

Jesus is speaking to those who have faced injustice, to those who are hungry and suffering – and he is offering them a message of hope – a promise that their circumstances will one day get better.

But, it is from this same perspective that Jesus is offering a note of caution to those who are already rich, to those who have no hunger, to those who laugh and to those who are loved and favored by the people around them. Yet, are these the type of warnings and cautions that people like to hear? Is Jesus suggesting that all should be poor, crying, hungry, and hated so that they might be blessed? Answering these questions depends mostly on the perspective or lens through which we approach the text. Should it be approached as a list of seemingly unfair demands – like I approached my Aunt Nora’s “rules?” or...should it be approached in a way that allows us to see God’s love actively at work in and through the teachings of Jesus?

Martin Luther often suggested that the Word of God could be interpreted using two distinct approaches. He said that Scripture can be read through the perspective of Law or through the perspective of Gospel. Law, for Luther, refers to what God demands of us – much like a set of legal codes and standards that we are required to follow. And Gospel, for Luther, refers to what God promises to and for us through the gift of Jesus Christ.

And so, when I read today’s gospel text, I cannot help but question: is Jesus speaking about Law or is he speaking about Gospel?

Of course, the answer is both. Jesus is laying out some lawful standards that challenge those

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<sup>1</sup>Taken from: [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3967](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3967)

who are seemingly rich, full, and happy but he isn't doing it to say that they shouldn't enjoy the good things of this life – instead he is offering a warning or a reminder not to forget those who are hungry and poor... those who lack the things that others have in abundance. He offers these woes so that those who have much might remember those who have little or nothing, so that the Gospel message of God's love might be seen in and through our giving and sharing from the blessings that have already been given to us. This call to love is made clear in the verse that follows today's text, where Christ calls us to love all people, even those who might be considered our enemies.

In today's text, both Law and Gospel are working together to share God's message of love in a way that both comforts and challenges – in a way that offers a message of hope and a reminder that the people of God are called to give, to love, and to share from the blessings that they have already received.

This afternoon, as we gather for the annual meeting, will we adhere to the woes of the gospel message? Will we find a way to emulate God's love in and through all that we do?

As we depart from this place and interact with a world filled with people who are in need of food, support, and God's perfect love – will we allow ourselves to be aligned with the will of God? Will we give? Will we love? Will we serve?

When faced with the challenges of this life – will we trust in the words of Christ who promises that these struggles and mourning are but temporary hurdles? Will we trust in the hope and the blessing that is promised to us in Christ? Will we allow ourselves to see the gospel message that underlies the words of Christ in today's holy gospel according to Luke?

As a child, I was unable to see my Aunt Nora's actions as anything other than unfair rules that tried to keep me from enjoying life – because of this, I missed out on the warm embrace of the one lady who without a doubt, loved me as her own. I hope to never do that again. I hope to never get so blindsided by law that I miss out on the love that exists in and through the gospel message of Christ – a message that calls the children of God to be faithful servants; a message that offers hope and comfort to all who suffer and mourn. A message of love for all people – for those who are rich and for those who poor. For those who are hungry and for those who are filled. For those who laugh and those who mourn. For both the accepted and the rejected.

God's love knows no bounds. His mercy and his grace are unending, and through the gospel message of Jesus Christ, there is hope for all people and for all circumstances, in both this life and in eternity with Christ.

Through the grace and hope of Jesus Christ, we are truly blessed. Amen.

