

Blessings and Woes from the Holy God

Luke 6:17-26

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 17, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, *And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: "Blessed are you..."*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Amazingly... because of our 3-year lectionary, and because of how Easter moves from year-to-year (moving Lent and shortening Epiphany)... amazingly, I've never had opportunity in these 12 years as Calvary's pastor to preach on and help you meditate upon this text! So, what a joyous opportunity this morning to proclaim to you Law and Gospel from this text, that you might cherish Christ as the giver of Blessings *and* Woes.

Since we haven't had prior opportunity, allow me to give a bit of framework: this text sounds like 'Luke's version' of the Sermon the Mount; it's so similar to Matthew's. And, scholars wonder if, in fact, it may be (thus, our sermon hymn)! However, others say, no – this is a very *similar* sermon, but on a different occasion – because here it says Jesus comes down the mountain to a "level place," so this is the "sermon on the *plain*." Well, whether that level place is a geographical feature within the mountains (so that Sermon on the Mount means the same as Sermon on the Plain), or whether the

location is different (so that the Sermon the Plain is a separate, but similar sermon) really isn't of great consequence.

But, here's what *is* of great consequence: Jesus has recently been proving himself to be the Holy One of God. He's received the unwilling confession of the demons; He's received the marveling wonder of the crowds at the authority of His Word; He's proven to his disciples that they – sinful men that they are – are in the presence of the Holy God. And *now* we hear that he 'came down with them'... a reference to him coming down from the mountain top.

Mountains are very important in the Scriptural record. Whether Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion (or any others in between), the mountain tops are always places depicted as holy places of the power of God. And, here, we find that Jesus – the Holy One of God – has just been on the mountain praying... in other words, the Son of the Triune Godhead is conversing with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The mysterious Three-in-One are in holy communication, and then (the beginning of our text) this "Holy One of God" in the flesh comes down the mountain to bring the Holy Word to the crowds.

We might consider this the 'antitype' of the image of Moses. Just as Moses, his face radiating from having been in the presence of God, comes down the mountain with God's Word to the people (the Ten Commandments), so also Jesus, *being* the very Holy One of God,

comes down the mountain with God's Word to the people – blessings and woes.

And as Jesus comes down from the mountain, his *face* does not glow with the holiness of God; rather, his whole *being* emits it (if you will) so that (our text says) “all the crowd sought to touch Him, for *power* came out from him and healed them all.”

This should remind us that Jesus' mercy and healing is actually not really the main focus of this account; it's a byproduct of the fact that the power of the Holy One of God is in the midst of these people and that He is about to give to all – his primary audience *and* us his secondary audience – the Holy Word of God.

But just because he is going to give it within earshot of every generation does not mean these words are words for a generic crowd of people. In fact, our text specifically says that Jesus lifted up his eyes *on his disciples*... that's not limited to the Twelve (just verses before our text they're called the *apostles*), but it's also not broad and generic to include 'all people, even the wicked.' In lifting up his eyes upon his disciples, Jesus now speaks to his followers, to the faithful, to the Church, to you and me and all who were baptized into and raised up in the Christian faith and have been beneficiaries of His cross and are the inheritors of his testament and – in awaiting the revelation of that inheritance – are sustained by Word and Sacrament.

In other words, if this audience is as narrow as the Church and not as broad as the whole unbelieving world, then the Blessings and Woes must be read in the same way. We often misinterpret the blessings as if they are blessings upon the generically poor, the generically hungry, the generically mournful... as if it should be our goal to be poor, hungry, or mournful that we might gain the blessing. Then we judgmentally and self-righteously condemn any who are wealthy, well-fed and happy. But that instinctive interpretation really is an absurd interpretation, isn't it?

As Christ looks at his *followers* as he says these things, we must understand what it means to be 'poor' in Christ. It doesn't mean, "I gave up everything to follow you. Look at me and my poverty!" (Remember, Peter tried that, and Jesus would have none of it). But, neither does being 'poor' in Christ only have to be a 'spiritual' poverty, a humility of repentance, as if our bodily life has nothing to do with our spiritual life. No, to be 'poor' in Christ means to understand that the daily bread we *do* have is not ours. It doesn't *belong* to us, we haven't (in a survival-of-the-fittest mode) *amassed* it for ourselves, and what the Lord giveth, the Lord can taketh away, and we will *still* say "Blessed be the Name of the Lord."

The Small Catechism, when talking about all the things that God has given me, all the daily bread by which the world might consider me rich, the Small Catechism never uses the qualifier "my." It's not *your* house, *your* home, *your* clothing, *your* shoes... they are

all from God; and faith in that is willing to say “All that I have is Yours, O God” and therefore, is willing to pray “Thy will be done” even regarding our earthly treasures... So that I don’t have to define my life by chasing after the highest-paying job and forcing family life and God to fit in to what I’ve carved out for myself regarding academia and career.

Indeed, “Blessed are you who are poor,” Blessed are the faithful who are willing to see that all their wealth, all their poverty, and everything in between depends upon God’s temporal plans for them in view of His eternal plans for them. Blessed are you who see that and understand that and live by that, because you can rest assured that yours is the kingdom of God, yours is the true inheritance, yours is that which Christ purchased for you by his blood, far *more* and far more *eternal* than you could ever purchase with your gold and silver. If he now grants you gold and silver for this life, fine. But, if he doesn’t, that’s fine, too. For yours is the kingdom of God.

By the way, that word “yours” is an important one. It’s not necessarily the same as saying “*to you* is the kingdom of God.” The little phrase “*to you*” conveys an indirect beneficiary, with the focus being on the object of whatever is being given. But the word “yours” is a **possessive** pronoun, meaning you actually have the right to claim it and own it as *your* inheritance.

Now, in the same way, what of you who are “hungry now.” Certainly, that could include a bodily hunger (because we’re not just spirits trapped in a bodily frame)... it could include a bodily hunger, but that doesn’t mean we all lament our full cupboards or force ourselves to fast. To hunger as a follower of Christ means to know that *he* will provide the satisfaction. One might hunger for food: don’t steal from others, the Lord will provide. One might hunger for relationships: don’t sacrifice your baptismal identity to be loved, the Lord will provide. One might hunger for righteousness: don’t seek to be holy of your own merit, the Lord will provide (indeed, has provided) the burnt offering to be the sacrificial lamb in our stead so that no father must offer up his son, because the *Holy* Father has offered up his *Holy* Son, that we might be satisfied in hiding in *His* merit, His righteousness, His promises and promised benefits.

“Blessed are you who weep now”... does not the devil, the world, and our sinful nature cause the faithful much reason to weep. The world entices us in fleshly desires; our sinful nature is so willing to pursue such desires, and the devil is all too willing to point out our sins and accuse us of them... and the shame brings us to tears. Yes, we weep over ourselves and our own sinfulness. But, we also weep over how we suffer at the hands of a ruthless world, so willing to use you until it’s had its way with you; so willing to run over you if it advances the agenda of someone else. And we also weep for the *world*... so lost in error’s maze, championing the destruction of

babies, championing the laziness of those unwilling to work, championing the deceitfulness and empty promises of politicians, championing the worship of 'mother earth' and the adoration (or really, *absurdity*) of 'relative truth.' What reason we have to weep over our society and our world. And yet, the Lord promises, you shall laugh in the new creation. You shall laugh in vindication. You shall laugh in the perfection of the life of the world to come. So, while you weep over this world and all the tribulation it inflicts upon you, "be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."

The final blessing goes directly to the Christian confession, doesn't it?: "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, *on account of the Son of Man!*" You can almost hear the same divine thought being conveyed by Christ as when he says, "Whoever confesses me before men, I will confess before my Father in heaven." Surely, we know the frustration of life in a society that ridicules and mocks the Christian faith, that misunderstands Christianity's love of God's holy Law as hypocritical legalistic moralism... a society that has no use for the blessed Gospel because it has no pulse of its own sin... a society that ridicules our desire to share with them the exclusive truth of the gospel of Christ for the eternal benefit of the whole world; they interpret that as 'imposing our will on the whole world', as bigotry, closed-mindedness, intolerance. And, in the face of all these things, how tempting to quiet our confession, be ashamed of it and

intimidated to wear it daily, tempted to assimilate into worldly ways. But Jesus says, “No, you have every reason to rejoice! Every reason to leap for joy! If the world hates you, it hated me first. If it hates your confession, that’s pretty good indication that you are confessing *me*, and where your confession reveals your heart’s confidence in *me* and *my* cross and *my* gospel and *my* will for this world and the next, you will *not* be put to shame, but your reward (not implying *earned*, but *stored* and *safeguarded for you*) your reward is already great in heaven.” “After all,” Jesus says,” the prophets knew the same fate. Do you think Elijah, Isaiah, Daniel and Jeremiah lived lives of clear blue skies and happiness and popularity? Not remotely... and yet, they share with you the inheritance of heaven. So, when the world excludes you on account of the name of Christ, so be it... you have eternal life awaiting you; with that, what earthly-minded joy can possibly compare?” Jesus says.

Now, this would be a good place to stop. We’re all warm and fuzzy. Time to move on to the Sacrament. But Jesus doesn’t stop with that. He reminds us once again that he’s the Holy One of Israel. He is the One, St John the Baptist says, who will come with winnowing fork in his hand. And so, Jesus paints the picture for you, his followers... you, His Church (remember, he’s speaking to his disciples)... he paints the picture for you, if you are tempted to think that maybe the world is on to something in forgoing the gospel and just living your best life now.

For as many blessings Jesus speaks, he equally speaks Woes: “Woe to you who are rich, who are full now, who laugh now, who have people speaking well of you now.” Interpret this rightly, friends. Christ’s doctrine is not one that chastises *any* type of happiness in this life, doesn’t he in fact teach us to pray for daily bread? ... rather he speaks woes to those who, though having the reputation of ‘follower, disciple,’ nevertheless find their meaning in life in their temporal riches, their immediate satisfaction, their balance of happy versus sad days, their great reputation. And, keep in mind, such ‘woes’ are not merely words of a good teacher who really wishes you would consider a more humble, modest lifestyle: but these woes are spoken by the Holy One of God who has come down the mountain to give the Word of God to his followers.

In other words, the Woes are eternally serious, and they reveal the great temptations that **our** daily lives know by the love of Americana – the worldly promises of wealth, happiness, good times, popularity. Don’t fool yourself into complacency: those temptations are very real; they’re even preached weekly by motivational speakers and TV evangelists, and – if we’re not careful – we all-too-willingly live with those same measures of success and, supposedly, God’s goodness and love.

“Woe to you,” Jesus says, “if you buy into such a false gospel being spewed by such false prophets. Beware of such things... for in this fallen world of disease, brokenness, greed... such false gospels

only succeed in removing you from Christ... then they end in vanity and despair.”

But, you also know the promises of Christ, promises that His *coming* in the flesh into this world means your *going* in the flesh into the life of the world to come, promises that His sacrifice on the cross means your solid footing before the throne of the Almighty, promises His forgiveness means your clear conscience, promises that His resurrection means your vindication, promises that His mediation for you *now* means you will not *then* hear, “Woe to you,” but will eternally hear and receive all the benefits of that phrase spoken by the Holy One of God: “Blessed are you.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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