

Sunday, February 13, 2022

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

What if???

Luke 6:17-26

INTRODUCTION:

The last two weeks we took a magnifying glass to look carefully at how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus began to take hold as a literal way of navigating through life both as individuals and equally as important how to succeed as a community. Paul's letters to a toxic church in Corinth explained how love behaves and also gave a quick start guide to troubleshoot and reverse the growing toxicity. He attempts to bring followers of Jesus from the religiosity and abstraction of simply believing in love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace to the tangible, life-changing experience of knowing that God's invitation is for us to actually live this way and practice love, mercy, forgiveness and grace in every aspect of our lives.

The very best way to make that great shift from studying the trail map to actually skiing the slopes is to know how Jesus did it and follow in that way. In other words, follow the instructor's lead down the mountain. Then you will really know.

For three years Jesus traveled, taught, healed, and liberated the hearts and minds of the people in Palestine. Those who followed began to view the human condition through a different lens. To see the world as God sees it is to discover an expansive, inclusive, compassionate and generous God.

Today and next week we are going to read one of Jesus' most famous teachings about how we might actually come close to heaven right here on earth. What if we took the words of Jesus as if he really meant it?

As Luke tells it, there was a great crowd following Jesus everywhere he went. Most of the people were poor, disenfranchised or suffering in various ways and were urgently in need of change; physically, mentally and spiritually. The healing that Jesus offers and the good news that he proclaims, however, is easily received as bad news for some. How do you hear it? Either way, for anyone who wants to see the world from God's point of view, this teaching is critical in focusing that lens.

Jesus had spent the night before alone on a mountain, As he returned, he gathered his disciples and, as always, the crowds also began to gather. Here to read what happens next, from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6 verses 17-26, is Peter Nash and his "care-group" for this year's Youth Mission Trip.



SCRIPTURE:

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“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. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“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.

The Word of God for the people of God.**PRAYER**

Loving God, you meet us in our struggle to understand you fully and generously give us experiences of your goodness and loving-kindness. Reveal yourself to us today, so that we may know you directly and deeply, as we follow in the Way of Jesus. AMEN.

SERMON *What if?*

So, what do you think? Good news...bad news? Do you hear hope in these blessings or are the woes making you squirm a little? I'm not going to lie, I kind of get fidgety even though I know this is actually really good news.

“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**,

Rich, full, laughing and appreciated by all? That pretty much sounds like where I want to be, and I'm guessing that's the same for you. This is the good life we all

aspire to. But clearly, Jesus is saying that this very well may be the path of misery, despair and grief. Could it be true that we, who are rich, full, laughing and appreciated by all are actually in a perilous position? Why do you think that is?

I think it's because to have wealth, to not know food insecurity, to never experience the agony of innocent suffering or the pain of marginalization, makes it very difficult to have compassion for, or identify with, the majority of people in the world who live entirely different realities than we do. Our privilege and social status blinds us to the urgent needs and extreme suffering most people in the world experience every single day.

The insidious problem is that, from a very young age, we are all given this map to follow through our life. It's like this invisible treasure map that promises to lead us to "the good life" We are given the map by the family we grow up with, the school we go to, the friends we make, celebrities, books, magazines, film and TV. Social media especially amplifies which map we are told to follow. We unconsciously use this *life travelers guide* to shape our identity, define our purpose and give us a sense of belonging. The map steers our path and charts our progress. Get top grades at the finest schools - check. Excel at least one sport, ideally become a captain - check. Become a leader in some kind of community service - check. Always look your best, project confidence, and never admit defeat, weakness or uncertainty - check - check and check. Naturally we strongly infer that if we diligently follow this map, just around the next bend, we will one day arrive in the *Promised Land*, ahh, the good-life; financial security, a sweet car or two, a loving, stable relationship, a fancy house, and hopefully, a happy, well adjusted, healthy family that you can then pass the map on to.

Woe to you who trust in the map.

Don't get me wrong, all of those way-markers are worthy and good but the woeful illusion is that the best possible life finds fulfillment in financial gain, self-interest, acquisition and socially acceptable accomplishment.

I don't think Jesus is condemning or making a judgement against wealth, a full belly or happiness. That's ludicrous. In fact, scripture teaches us that prosperity, joy, and the esteem of our peers are all God's desire for every single one of us. It's simply that

the goal of attaining all these things or being given all these things is a perfect set up for living in the ever-escalating anxiety and fear of not measuring up or, God forbid, losing what you have gained. This is a fear that inevitably gives birth to all woes.

What if I'm found out to be not so special? ***What if*** the market takes a dive and I've leveraged everything? ***What if*** I don't get that next big break? ***What if*** my spouse leaves me? ***What if*** COVID finds yet another lethal variant? The "***what if's***" can be overwhelming and intensely terrifying!

What Jesus teaches us is a cautionary tale about the illusion of financial security and self-sufficiency as the end game in and of itself. In fact, he gives us an entirely different map that doesn't include ***any*** of the common markers at all. On this map is the way of naked vulnerability, the way of humility, the way of sharing mutual successes and our mutual needs. This is an altogether different route. It is a rocky road and not all that well traveled. It requires great courage to be vulnerable or risk a humble stance or reveal your neediness. But here-in lies the real blessing Jesus speaks of. At the point when our emotional, financial, or physical reality pushes us out beyond own means, and we stumble into the ultimate trust-fall. The good news is that what we feared and were certain was our humiliating demise turns out to actually be the next critical step along our journey in becoming our true, fulfilled self. We are blessed because in falling we come to know our faith is not in vain. We are blessed by God's mercy-soaked acceptance of us exactly as we are. We are blessed with a trust that sincerely depends on God's loving-kindness. No matter how perilous the way ahead may appear, we are blessed with an enduring hope even in the discomfort and unknowing of traveling an alternative way.

Most of the crowd that gathered around Jesus were the poor, the hungry, the sick and the sorrowful. All of these people had very real and pressing needs that required immediate attention. Generally speaking, they were well positioned to receive. Jesus says that we are blessed when we recognize our own neediness. Perhaps that is because that is when our eyes really open and God becomes most visible.

What if we threw away the maps we were given and went a different way? Jesus insists there is another way. The way of humility over pride, the way of peace over war, the way of self-sacrifice over self-interest. The way of love over hate and justice over vengeance. This is the scary, unknown, rarely tried alternative way, but what if?

What if it is true that our inter-connectedness is far more important than our constructed differences?

What if our inter-dependance, not our competitive advantage, is the glue that holds the world together?

What if the people you kids are about to meet and serve in rural Appalachia are actually the ones who are blessed? What can they teach you? What wisdom can you bring back to us? And how can we all find the courage to actually organize and move out of pandemic, by facing the deep-discomfort and hard work of following another way, the way of Jesus, leading us to personal and social transformation?

What if?????