

This is Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is speaking about wealth and poverty to his disciples. When I started studying it again, I realized I really didn't like Luke's version. First, I don't think it is a blessing to be poor, hungry, disrespected, and demeaned. And I don't think being rich, satisfied, joyful, and respected is a curse. But Luke might say, "Your issue is with Jesus, not me."

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷He 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. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²²"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice 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. ²⁴"But Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵"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. ²⁶"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

As I said, I don't like this passage. It's hard for me to deal with this passage not only because of the blessings of the poor and curses of the rich, but it divides us into haves and have nots.

But even more, it occurs right at the intersection of the Superbowl and Valentine's day. Of course, today, all kinds of products and causes will be promoted. Some commercials may even tug at our heartstrings. Sometimes, admit it, the commercials are better than the game. The impetus behind all this creativity is still to get us to spend, not to mention overspend. And I know I am the target of these ads, not the poor.

There is the gambling being over-encouraged by the new sports betting apps available in our state that let you bet from your computer or phone. We are being bombarded by them, telling us that we can wager on a game while people go hungry. That must be sinful.

But I will notice the commercials and probably be convinced to want to buy something, maybe even something I didn't need or even know I needed.

And it is Valentine's Day tomorrow, with it tons of chocolate, flowers, and jewelry. It's a Hallmark Holiday where love is celebrated. It is ranked fifth or sixth in terms of consumer spending. But we must also remember not all people are in relationships that can embrace this notion of romantic love, and the day might be painful.

It is a day of love, and we can remember we are called to love our God, our neighbor, and ourselves. So, we can lift love up as one of our core values. If we are in a relationship, celebrate that deep love as well. As I thought about this, I wondered what I would get for Marlene. I won't say just in case she watches. So, I will not put down flowers, chocolate, jewelry, and gifts that express our passion, if we live within our means. While gifts do not replace personal acts of love, a special gift is picked out for a person that has them in mind. It is a reminder of love. Love rooted in God.

The people gather on a level place, not a mountain. There is healing, and now it's time for teaching. Jesus speaks to the assembled disciples, people from all walks of life and social classes, Jews, and gentiles. He starts talking and offers blessings. Now scholars aren't quite sure what to make of the word blessing. Some call it satisfied; some call it happy. But these folks he blesses are the poor, the hungry, the ones who need hope, and those defamed and demeaned. These conditions don't seem very blessed. They are certainly not on our list of aspirational goals. No one starts the year saying, "I want to be poorer and hungrier, less hopeful, and more despised." This just doesn't make our New Year's resolutions.

Many of us prefer Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, for they feel more spiritual, or at least more loving and inclusive. Matthew 5:

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

And there are no woes.

I think Matthew is not just spiritual, but also physical. Luke is talking about poverty, hunger, hopelessness, and being defamed and demeaned. He is talking about those who suffer. The Biblical image for the poor includes those without resources, the defenseless, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant to name a few. He wants these people to know they are of particular concern to God.

Jesus is a great teacher, but so was his mother. I believe he learned these blessings and woes from his mother. Remember when Mary visited Elizabeth before Jesus was born in Luke 1:

⁴⁶And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” In her love for the infant Jesus, she may have sung him the Magnificat as a lullaby.

So, Jesus learned about this great reversal of values from his mother and it stuck with him. She sang about the expectation that in Jesus there would be a societal reversal.

But here we are in 2022 and the reversal hasn't occurred. The poor are still with us. Food insecurity is still a way of life. Some situations still seem hopeless, and those we might see as the least of these are being blamed and shamed for their situations. People are still being treated as objects to be discarded.

And yet, Jesus wants these folks to know God loves them. They are not forgotten by God. They are not expendable. This is a theme all through scripture that Jesus picks up. These folks are remembered as being of particular concern to God. There is no sin or shame in being poor. To be vulnerable is not a sign of the disfavor of God. Jesus says they are favored. Yet they are still with us. Why are they still with us if they are so important to God? Let's hold that question.

Let's turn to the woes on those with wealth, privilege, and prestige, fully laughing in spite of terrible things, and the well-respected. And let's get real. This is us. Even if we don't feel it on the world's stage, this is us. We are indeed rich in comparison to much of the world. This does not mean that there is no inequality and injustice in our land, and we should never forget that.

Woe to those of us who are rich, privileged, with more than enough, and living without a care. And woe to us when people use those false measures to praise us.

I really, really hope Jesus is not cursing me. I hope that I am right, that another way to look at woes is appropriate, and I think it is. Jesus was dependent on some wealthy women who underwrote his ministry. He can't be cursing them, can he? I hope woe is a warning, a warning Jesus is speaking to his followers; that's us. I think it is whoa. **WHOA** like you would say to a horse. Or maybe a "watch out." It's an answer to, "Well then, just what does Jesus want?" I think he wants to warn us. Be careful that in our well-heeled, well-educated, well-respected, living well, we don't forget those who don't enjoy what we enjoy in our land and our world.

In other words, he wants us to be the church. Jesus wants us to end binary thinking, an "us vs. them" way of looking at things.

He wants us to see the world through the eyes of the good Samaritan. You probably know the story. A traveler was attacked, beaten, and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite, traditional good guys, pass by and cross to the other side

of the road, probably avoiding contact with a corpse and thus disqualifying them from their temple duties. A Samaritan, a traditional bad guy, comes by and stops, takes care of the man, takes him to an inn, and guarantees his expenses while he heals. This story is not a call to boo the religious leaders. Instead, it is a summons to see people in need as part of our family and responsibility. And that even good excuses are not enough.

Jesus wants us to quit dividing the world into two groups and begin to see the world as one human family. It's what he wants. It's what God expects.

But isn't Luke's using us and them, rich and poor, blessed and cured, just the opposite of seeing everyone as one human family? Why did Luke write this way? I think he interpreted Jesus' words through the lens of what he thought the early church should be, and may have been for a while.

The church in the Book of Acts, the second volume of Luke's work, lived a communitarian lifestyle. It was a place where everyone put what they had in a common pot. People had their basic needs met from the common pool. The Book of Acts also reminds us that human sinfulness and jealousy made this lifestyle difficult, if not impossible. But Luke held it up as an ideal and grounded it in Jesus.

To this day, there are still people who try to live this way as they follow Christ. I admire them. They dedicate themselves to breaking down the wall that divides us. There are still others who approximate this by sharing common living areas and expenses. They try to live a simpler lifestyle. As they put it, they try to live simply that others might simply live. I admire them as well.

But what about us? What does Jesus want from us? What are we to do? I think Jesus wants us to be involved with helping meet the needs of people that he identifies with. As he says, "As you did to the least of these, so you did unto me."

I am proud of this church with these words etched in its chapel windows. It is also inscribed in its corporate and individual efforts to make our area and our world a better place. We are both financially generous and personally involved. This is a testimony to your faith.

Now back to the question that asks, "The poor, the hungry, the hopeless, the ridiculed are still with us. Why?" The hard and unpleasant answer is because humanity allows it.

I think Jesus is asking us to risk one more step. Our scripture talks about a world founded on Peace and Justice. Peace and Justice are what love looks like in the world of citizenship and politics. This is not a call to support one party or individual, nor is it limited to any country. It is a call to work to structure societies to become a world structured the way God would have it. God gave us this responsibility and wants us to bring it about. Jesus wants the world focused on “us,” not “us and them.” This is the kind of world Jesus calls us to build. This is what Jesus wants from us as well as our corporate generosity and personal acts of charity. It’s not either/or; it’s both/and.

I know the task feels impossible, but we discover God’s blessings when we attempt to live this way. And we will be able to hear Jesus say to you, “Blessed are you.”