



## THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

FEBRUARY 17, 2019

LUKE 6: 17-26

**“THRU THE EYES OF THE POWERLESS”**

He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

Looking at his disciples, he said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now,  
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you,  
when they exclude you and insult you  
and reject your name as evil,  
because of the Son of Man.

“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have already received your comfort.

Woe to you who are well fed now,  
for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,  
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

- In high school, I had the best part-time job a kid could ever hope for. I played taps for the funerals of Jewish war veterans. Whenever there was a funeral, I got excused from class. I just strolled out, waving goodbye to my class and my teacher.
- The Jewish veterans picked me up and off we would go. Mr. Rofsky, the father of my best friend was in the car. The men telling off-color jokes, complaining about the fatty

corned beef at the local deli, and talking about their friend who had passed on. I loved it.

- We would get out of the car at the cemetery, a bunch of overweight and out-of-shape Jewish men and me. They would hitch up their pants, get in some kind of almost straight line, and fire their rifles. I would play taps and then back in the car. More jokes, conversation about business, and then slipping me \$25 or \$30 bucks. Back to class until next time.
- These men were second-generation German, Russian, and eastern European immigrants. Hard working men. A Jewish minority, sometimes hated as we saw recently in the massacre at Tree of Life synogogue. Often at the bottom of the ladder when it came to social standing. Lots of ethnic jokes and prejudicial stereotypes about Jews in our culture.
- But in my experience, they were kind, funny, and generous men. I was a *goy* (Yiddish for a male non-Jew), but they treated me as one of their own. I was a friend to their sons. And they were grateful for my participation in their cemetery ritual.
- For another job in high school, I was a waiter at a Jewish delicatessen and restaurant. Yeah, one of the Jewish war veterans got me the job. One night we were having actors and actresses from the Kenley Players Theatre come after their performance. These were second-tier famous actors and actresses and cast members. I was pumped. The owner assured me I would get big tips from these big shots. After all, they were getting all their food and drinks free-of-charge.
- Well, they sure took advantage of the freebies. I worked my tail off all night bringing them more and more of everything as they stayed way past closing time. I was exhausted.
- As I cleared the table, I discovered not one person had left one cent. Not even a thank you on their way out.
- Here was my early lesson about the nature of reality. The wealthy and famous actors and actresses, idolized by many, getting all they could eat and drink free of charge did not give me a second thought. I was just some minimum wage kid who was invisible to them.

- And then there were the Jewish war veterans. A despised minority in the eyes of many, some struggling to gain a foothold in this country. Generous in spirit and friendship, slipping me more cash than my time and talent were really worth.
- If we want to look at the biblical big picture, Jesus most often spoke against what I will call the “big shots.” The power brokers, the wealthy, the political machine, the religious authorities.
- Today, we would call them what? About the same. The 1%, out-of-touch bishops and religious leaders, the same political machine (perhaps only worse), the corrupt power brokers.
- For example, when federal workers were laid off during the government shutdown, one of the “big shots” in the administration couldn’t figure out what all the whining was about. Why didn’t they all just go to a bank and get a loan?
- Wow! What a great idea. Try to get a loan when you’re living paycheck to paycheck, already up to your neck in debt, and have less than stellar credit. Presently, **out of work** and going deeper into debt! And, just how quickly do you think it takes to process a loan? Longer than the shutdown!
- These are the big shots. Out of touch. No empathy. Let them eat cake. After they get their loan, of course.
- In Jesus’ beatitudes, in his healings, and with his choice of lunch companions, Jesus expresses God’s special concern for the down-and-out. God sides with the poor, not because there is anything virtuous about poverty, but because of their suffering. God sides with the poor, not because being poor makes you special, but because the poor have been sinned against. Poverty is not holy, but being poor does give you a leg up in seeing and understanding what Jesus says about the “big shots.”
- Jesus and his followers not only threatened the values of wealth and power, but the institutions and systems that supported their values: religious law, the sacrificial system of the temple, religious dietary regulations, the distinction between who was considered clean and unclean, the class system dividing us into various social classes, role expectations for women and children, the power of the patriarchy, the use of violence in relationships, and racial and ethnic divisions. Jesus erases the distinction between insider and outsider—indeed every conceivable way that the big shots use to

divide the rest of us into bad and good, the acceptable and unacceptable. The in crowd and the out of luck. Those worthy of a second glance and those not even worth a glance.

- Jesus tells the wealthy, likely tongue in cheek, that when they give a banquet they should not invite their friends because they will just get an invitation in return. Instead, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind. How often do you think that has happened in the last 2000 years?
- Today, whenever there is a massive social event in any large city, they don't invite the homeless. They make sure the homeless are moved away from the festivities, so the tourists aren't offended by the sight of the poorest among us, many of whom are the mentally ill released from caring institutions we closed decades ago....
- In Jesus' day, the most intimate interaction one could have with another human being outside the bedroom was to eat together. It was called table fellowship.
- **You were not *what* you ate. You were *who* you ate with.** And no self-respecting big shot ever ate with the sinners.
- Now we have to get our head around what this word *sinners* meant in Jesus' day. Sinners are not people who have committed a sin and feel guilty about what they've done. Sinners are not people who use four-letter words, miss church, cheat on their taxes, or drink too much beer or smoke a little pot.
- ***Sinners refer to identifiable groups of outsiders.*** People from one of the despised professions, like tax collectors. It was repugnant to the big shots that Jesus chooses Matthew as one of his closest allies. Sinners are those who were open and flagrant about their immorality: thieves, prostitutes, murderers, idolaters. All who failed to keep the religious law according to the religious authorities, like shepherds. All Samaritans and Gentiles. The lepers and possessed. The poor and those with every kind of disease.
- Jesus did not have a problem with those falsely accused of being sinners by the big shots. They were his followers. He regularly ate with them to the dismay of the big shots. Jesus, himself, was called a drunkard and a glutton by the rich and powerful. Who made sure all these folks were shunned and sidelined.

- What Jesus did was go after the true sinners: **those who misuse their power, wealth, and social standing to dismiss, diss, and damage others....**
- Albert Einstein spent his last years at Princeton University. Ever the distracted genius, he walked the campus in wrinkled pants and a ratty, baggy sweater. One day, walking by the upscale Princeton Inn, a wealthy woman, mistaking him for one of the maintenance men, asked him to carry her bags into the inn. Albert shrugged and obliged.
- Afterwards, the desk clerk, mouth open in amazement, asked, “Madam, don’t you know who that is?”
- She, of course, responded as if her world was being encroached upon. “What do you mean?”
- Jesus erases the cleanliness and purity laws used to draw distinctions between people. He turns the world on its head. The poor and hungry are blessed. The rich and satiated need watch out. By erasing the distinctions between people, Jesus announces a new image of god. A god who loves the marginalized and rejected, whose tender heart aches for the uninvited and unloved. A compassionate parent, transcending our petty categories of who is in and who is out. A god who offers those who follow Jesus the opportunity to be healing agents in the world.
- It is any surprise that the early Christian house churches consisted of women, children, the poor, and powerless. Here was a god who granted them value, respect, and love missing everywhere in their lives.
- Jesus rejects the notion that external things defile or pollute our essential being. God doesn’t mistake wrinkled pants and a baggy old sweater for a bum. God sees the bum’s inner genius and value....
- For me, it is a perpetual embarrassment that, by and large, churches are the last to welcome the marginalized and rejected. Churches are often the last to extend compassion. Churches are often the last to recognize Christ in the dismissed and disregarded.

- In 2019 the United Methodist Church, the second largest protestant denomination in America, is on the verge of blowing apart over whether or not to accept openly lgbtq clergy and members.
- This is fifty years after the transformative stonewall riots in New York where gay men first fought back against discrimination and unjust laws. This is almost sixty years after I learned my favorite cousin was gay. This is not some new and surprising development in human expression, folks.
- Denominations where the clergy abuse same sex children condemn same sex relationships among adults. I think my head is going to explode.
- Why are churches the last to minister to HIV patients, accept same-sex relationships, minister to transgender teens, who are kicked out of their homes at astonishing rates by their religious conservative parents, ending up on the street with no where to go. Churches sing *God Bless America* when we send kids off to war, but where are we with vets who are discarded when they return home. And, by the way, when our cities sweep the streets of the homeless, a significant percentage of them are veterans.
- Do we really have any idea how much addiction is in Millvale? And, who wants to join me in trying to build ministry that offers them specific help and hope?
- **We are in the neighborhood for good.** And I believe that. And I believe we are a big-hearted people here at clc. I love you guys and I think we are on the right track. But there is need for so much more good in the 'hood. We've started, but how much more can we do with the poor and the hungry, the addicted, those without hope, those who bear unbelievable losses.
- Do not mistakenly think I am a bleeding-heart liberal. I was raised in a Lutheran congregation where I was taught about the importance of what was called the common good. That is, how do ministries, programs, and safety nets benefit the greatest number of people. I call it being expansive because I actually believe what Jesus teaches.
- Not what some obscure old testament passage says. Not everything that Paul writes because, like all of us, he got tripped up by the rigid cultural expectations of his day. But Jesus Christ, son of God, son of man reveals the God's eye view.

- So even as a teenager, I experienced that what other people said was often just a bunch of crap.
- Jews didn't Jew people out of money or want to control the entertainment industry. They were generous, funny, bright, and inclusive people because they knew what it was like to be excluded.
- The wealthy and the powerful weren't to be admired and emulated. Most often, they turned out to be greedy, rude, narcissistic, and self-centered people.
- The reality of life is revealed when you spend a little time at the bottom in whatever form that takes.
- Spend a little time, as I did in Los Angeles, taking public transportation to the unemployment office where you stand in line just so you can be treated like dirt by some civil servant who hates his job. And then have the company that canned you lie so they don't have to pay you. The world looks a bit less shiny and blessed from the bottom.
- Spending some time on the fringes helps in appreciating the Lutheran understanding of sin. When you do understand, you're surprised that anything works.
- Here's the tricky part, though. Jesus makes his declaration and then doesn't offer any solution, any fix, any guidelines for us.
- What he does here, as he does elsewhere, is to try to open our eyes to the way things really are. This morning, we are to look at the blessed point of view arising from the bottom: from the eyes of the poor, the powerless, the starving, those broken by unbearable loss and then see where it leads us to action. But first, we are to just wake up. Keep looking and watching and observing and staying aware.
- Song: **WAKE UP EVERYBODY** by Keb Mo'