

"BLESSINGS"

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill

Sunday February 17, 2019

Luke 6:17-26

When I was growing up, some of ministers I saw were very dour looking. Several looked as if they had just eaten something very disagreeable.

I have a book of church cartoons.

One of the comics has a picture of a man looking a little unhappy.

He is answering the question of a woman across from him, and he says:

"no m'am I'm not a preacher, I'm just recovering from the flu."

That was the stereotype minister when I was a child.

And what would happen in church on a Sunday seemed very serious, and slightly unpleasant.

It was like going to the doctor, or taking your cod liver oil; good for you and necessary,
but better when it was over.

Our text this morning was often used as ammunition that Christians should be sad, serious and somewhat sour.

"Blessed are you who are poor, 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.

Woe to you who are laughing, you will mourn and weep."

Blessed are those who are poor, hungry and sad, and it was taken to mean, that if you were those things then you would be blessed.

No wonder everyone was so glum looking. "Woe to you who laugh, now"

But how is this good news? Where is the gospel of Jesus in this?

Consider the picture of Jesus from a chapter just before the one we read.

The Pharisees and their religion scholars came to Jesus' disciples greatly offended.

They asked them;

“What is this teacher Jesus doing eating and drinking with crooks and sinners?” Jesus heard about it and spoke up, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders- an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.”

They asked him, “John’s disciples are well known for keeping fasts and saying prayers. Also the Pharisees. But you seem to spend most of your time at parties. Why?”

Jesus said; “When you’re celebrating a wedding you don’t scrimp on the cake and wine. You feast. Later you may need to pull in your belt, but this isn’t the time. As long as the bride and groom are with you, you have a good time. No one throws cold water on a friendly bonfire. This is kingdom come!”

This time, our time, is kingdom come, time.

Jesus was criticized for being the life of the party.

There was nothing sour or dour about Jesus.

If blessing comes from being sad and poor, and hungry, Jesus wasn’t blessed.

But yet we know there was no man on earth more blessed than Jesus, no one more beloved of God, who lived a more perfect life, and is our best example.

So how do we understand this text?

I would invite you to imagine you are part of Luke’s church, an early Christian, or even one of the first disciples of Jesus.

You live in an occupied country.

Following Jesus put you at risk of being thrown out of the Synagogue, and ostracized by your friends and family.

The early church was persecuted – following Jesus cost them economically, and socially.

Nabeel Qureshi in his book Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus describes the cost in our time for Muslims to turn to Jesus:

“The cost for a Muslim to accept the gospel can be tremendous. Of course, following Jesus meant that I would immediately be ostracized from my community. For all devout Muslims, it means sacrificing friendships and social connections that they have built from childhood. It could mean being rejected by one’s parents, siblings, spouse, and children. I know of many Muslim women who recognize their need for Jesus but have nowhere to turn if their husbands abandon them, or worse. They often do not have financial means to survive the next day, let alone fight for their children in court. My decision (to become a Christian) would shame my family with incredible dishonor.” (Seeking Allah. Finding Jesus p. 251-252)

Now imagine that Jesus is speaking to the persecuted church, or to Muslim’s who have left everyone and everything to follow him:

The crowd came to hear Jesus and to be healed of their diseases. Those who were troubled with demons came and were healed. All the people tried to put their hands on Jesus. Power came from Him and He healed them all.

Jesus looked at His followers and said, “Those of you who are poor are blessed, because the kingdom of God is yours. Those of you who are hungry now are blessed, because you will be filled. Those of you who have sorrow now are blessed, because you will laugh. You are blessed when men hate you and do not want you around and put shame on you because you trust in Me. Be glad in that day. Be full of joy for your reward is much in heaven.”

That is good news!

When we pay the price, as a disciple of Jesus, when difficult things happen, when we are unpopular, when we stand in opposition to the culture, and the path of the gospel and the road to the cross puts us in opposition to the powerful, and we feel we are lost, Jesus tells us we are blest and we will be blest when Jesus sets all things right.

Living an authentic Christian life is not easy or comfortable, but it is blessed not by the world around us, but by God.

God commits himself to us in the present day and will bless us richly in the time to come.

This passage also contains some warnings – I invite you to hear them from the translation of The Message:

“But it’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made.

What you have is all you’ll ever get.

And it’s trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself.

Your self will not satisfy you for long.

And it’s trouble ahead if you think life’s all fun and games.

There’s suffering to be met, and you’re going to meet it.

“There’s trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.”

Our task is to be true to Jesus.

Walking in his steps,

Discipleship is costly, and life is difficult – but we know that the healing, loving, blessing presence of Jesus is with us still.

Thanks be to God.