

Sermon for February 17, 2019
"Knowing God: Radical Talk"

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Luke 6:17-26

Since the beginning of the year we have been talking about how we know God. We have seen how God is revealed in the coming of the wise men. We have considered how God is made known to us in Jesus' baptism and in God calling and claiming us as children of God. We have learned how in Jesus turning the water into wine, that the Holy Spirit and new life is made known to us. We have seen how Jesus' calling to proclaim good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberation and freedom for the oppressed and imprisoned, reveals God's will for us. Two weeks ago, we examined how God's heart is made known to us when we consider the nature and depth of God's love for us and the love God calls us to have for each other.

Today we pick up that discussion with one of Jesus' teachings. Sometimes Jesus' teachings are hard to understand. We may just pass by assuming we understand without taking a close look, or we may think that its meaning goes too deep for us to understand. But if we take the time and effort, by even pausing to look closer, then we discover something of the depth of who God is.

Let's take a closer look at the passage we read from Luke a minute ago. Let's begin by putting it into perspective. Then in wrestling with it, we can know God better.

To all appearances, Jesus was a revolutionary. If you don't believe me just read the Gospels. Remember how Jesus began his ministry? He walked into the synagogue in his home town and claimed to be the Messiah. Then he told the people that God had sent the Messiah for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. His first sermon was so radical that it almost got him killed.

Then, like anyone leading a revolution, Jesus gathered followers. He started in Capernaum and traveled throughout Judea preaching in the synagogues. The Bible said that he proclaimed the Good News of the "kingdom," so I imagine his sermons were similar to the one in Nazareth. He was spreading his radical doctrines and ideas. He also healed people and that attracted even more people to Jesus.

When we meet Jesus in our lesson for today, he has just chosen his 12 disciples. He spent time praying before choosing them. After picking the 12, Jesus descended the mountain. This revolutionary preacher and his 12 lieutenants. And as they came to a plain the people flocked to them. They came to hear him preach. They came to be healed from disease. They came to be liberated of demons. And the crowds were reaching out for Jesus. Hoping to just touch the hem of his robe. They thought that if they did, they could be healed. And the power of God Almighty went out from Jesus!

Then, in this atmosphere, Jesus spoke. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Not "Blessed are the poor in spirit." That is what it says in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. This is the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. And Jesus is saying blessed are you that ain't got no money. And it's not "Blessed are the poor." It is blessed are you poor. He is speaking to the people in the crowd. He is saying "you who are poor are blessed." Why are they blessed? Because they have the kingdom of God. They don't have much, but the kingdom is for them. Well who will give it to them? I guess God. What about the rich? Well they are not blessed, in fact they are cursed. Why? 'Cause they already got stuff.

Then Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." Not "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." But blessed are those whose stomachs are empty and aching. Not those who have known hunger, but those who are hungry right now. Again it is not those who are hungry, but you who are hungry. Jesus is talking to the starving people in the crowd. At the moment they are feeling the pain of hunger, he is telling them they are blessed. How could they be blessed? They are blessed because they will be filled. They are blessed because they will have food in the Kingdom of God. How will they get it? I guess God will give it to them. And all of us who had big breakfasts this morning ask ourselves, "Well what about those who aren't hungry?" It

says they will hunger.

Jesus added, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." This one has no parallel in Matthew, but it still perplexes us. If someone is weeping, we imagine they have experienced a great loss. Perhaps a loved one has died, or they have lost their livelihood or have been violated in some way. How is such a one blessed? They are blessed because their weeping will stop and they will have reason to be joyful again. How can this be? Who will give them reason to laugh? Apparently, God will wipe their tears away and give them a reason to rejoice. Again what about those who aren't weeping? Well "Woe unto you, for you will mourn and weep."

What kind of radical talk is this? Up with the poor and down with the rich. It sounds like the slogans used by communist revolutionaries. Believe it or not some have used these words that way too. "But Preacher in Matthew it says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.'" Those words make more sense and we like them better. Isn't that what Jesus really meant here? And these woes, we don't like them, they make us feel uneasy. That doesn't sound like the Jesus we know. Maybe we should just ignore them."

I like the words in Matthew better too. They are easier to understand. They don't make us uneasy. They are easier to accept, but these are different words. They may sound similar, but they have a different meaning. I believe that Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write down these words because this is what Jesus meant. Sure we like Matthew better at this point, but God is using Luke to tell us something else.

Perhaps these woes in Luke make us feel uncomfortable because they are supposed to. Maybe Jesus intended to make the rich and powerful of the world squirm a little and think about their privilege. Let's take a closer look at the part of this lesson that makes us most uncomfortable: the woes. "Woe to the rich. - woe to those who aren't hungry." Should we who have things in this world be punished for our good fortune? Oh, being rich or just having enough to eat is not a crime against God, but failing to do what we can to feed the hungry and house the homeless is a crime. And all who are guilty of it need to examine their actions. "Woe to these who laugh." Is it our fault that we don't have something to cry about, should we be punished for that? Perhaps we have nothing to weep about because we ignore the suffering around us. If we were truly aware of the pain around us we would be weeping.

When you take a close look at this passage from Luke you see that Jesus was a revolutionary; a radical. He offered a revolutionary way of seeing the world and it was unpopular, and still is. Oh, it is popular today to talk about the poor. About their lack of motivation. About how to solve their problems. Now I could really talk about the poor! When my grandfather Alexander Stevenson, Sr. set foot on this shore, he didn't have a penny to his name and look where his grandson is now. He didn't have a 6th grade education and now his grandson has two masters' degrees. If a poor immigrant's son and grandson can go to college, anyone can. Anyone can make something of themselves in this country, if they just work at it."

But Jesus didn't talk about the poor or at the poor, he spoke with and to them. He and his disciples came down off their high hill and walked amongst the people. And Jesus said to the poor and the hungry and the distressed, "Blessed are you." They directly addressed their pains and their needs. And they made a lot of other people very uncomfortable.

If you follow Jesus like his disciples did, and seriously try to bless the poor, hungry and distraught, people will ridicule you. They will call you names like radical, revolutionary, bleeding heart, and many others. If they can't say something true about you, they will even make up lies about you. They may even throw rocks at you and attack you. But if you decide not to follow this revolutionary Jesus, people will praise you. They will call you a clear thinker and level headed. And they will say nice things about you. But Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man!" And he said, "Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets."

Jesus was a radical for the love of God. Are you?