



**C. Kutz-Marks**

**“Blessed Are...”**

Epiphany 6, c, Feb. 11, 200  
Luke 6:17-26

It was a Friday evening about 9:00 p.m. almost exactly 2 years ago in snowy Michigan. I had been down in my office in the basement studying our Scripture lesson for today from Luke 6, known as the Sermon on the Plain, and its parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 5, the better known Sermon on the Mount. But my eyes were almost shot and my stomach announced that it was snack time, so I headed first to the refrigerator and then snack in hand sat down in front of the television set. I flipped it on just in time to catch the end of a program called, “The Apprentice” with Donald Trump.

The winning team for that episode was being rewarded with a yacht ride out in New York Harbor in the evening. Their host was Steve Forbes, the multimillionaire former presidential candidate, who greeted them and welcome them aboard his magnificent yacht. They were all treated to champagne and a fabulous lobster meal. And afterwards as the winning team smoked Mr. Forbes’ cigars on the deck, they watched Forbes enter his private helicopter and fly off into the evening sky. A young man on the winning team said, “that's the kind of lifestyle that I want to be living in a few years.”

Snack was finished. And on the way back to my desk, it hit me like a ton of bricks, how far our culture has strayed from the virtue of humility that Jesus taught that is at the heart of the beatitudes. The juxtaposition of cigar smoke clouding the visage of a helicopter in flight and Jesus' words, "blessed are the poor," was staggering.

We had a similar experience this week here at University Christian Church. While many of the Disciples ministers of the Austin area and I were up at Brite Divinity School in Ft. Worth for the annual Minister's Week, unbeknown to us, each weekday here, standing on the sidewalk, which the police inform us is public space, a small band of incredibly loud and exceedingly obnoxious, self-appointed prophets ranted and raved at passersby, mostly UT students heading to and from their classes. They wore shirts that read, "All Homos go to Hell." They were spewing scripture and twisting the texts to say the exact opposite of what the Bible really says. They were calling people whores one moment, and in the next announcing the saving power of the blood of Jesus, and calling for repentance in the next. It was a nightmare.

Students were seeing this in front of our church and assuming these angry people were supported or condoned by University Christian Church.

- Ted White handed out literature to deny that association.
- Roslyn Hogan and numbers of students organized to counter the angry, screaming preachers;.
- Craig Bell had the sign out front made to explain that the street preachers weren't related to us.
- Mary Lu Johnston put on our marquee, "God loves everyone," again to dissociate this church from the horrific messages that were being propounded about 5 ft. away on the sidewalk.

You may have also heard that as Mary Lu tried to intervene and the misguided missiles on the street discovered that she was a minister here, they made sure that she understood that from their exalted vantage point, she SURELY would be burning in hell. Well, since I expect we'll all be sharing Mary Lu's eternal destiny, I guess they were damning us all as well.

Again, the juxtaposition of the Christian faith that this week's street preachers propounded, and what we believe here, was so great;

the embarrassment of being associated with that way of thinking was so deep;

the shared frustration that someone could read the same Bible that we do and come out with such a different religion, was so agitating,

that we are pushed reexamine the very core of what we believe and why.

And let me be clear at the outset here, it is not because of the severity of the street preachers' message that I find it so repugnant. If we are honest with the Bible, we know that it is an incredibly challenging, hard message to receive. As Mark Twain said it many years ago:

"It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

Our lesson from the Sermon on the Plain is a prime example of that. While the teaching begins with blessings to those who don't seem blessed – and we'll get to that – it ends in perfectly clear news:

Luke 6:24-26 "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.

We sometimes tend to patronize the ancients and believe that we are so intellectually superior. Here is a case of that being turned on its head in their recognizing the economic truth then and now that so many today in the well off Western world cannot seem to see. The rich are rich, the rich grow richer, the rich stay rich, only because they – or should I say, “we”- serve and maintain a rigorous economic SYSTEM that keeps the rich rich and keeps the poor poor. The impending complete triumph of global capitalism should open our eyes to what even the peasants saw clearly 2,000 years ago: that the richness for some comes at the expense of the poverty of others, is not an inevitability. It is a choice those that govern a society make. In our day many make capitalism’s case on the basis of efficiency. But what about justice? What about care “for the least of the these?”

These scriptures point to two reasons why we rich might be pitied, why Jesus said, “Woe to you...” First, because we are complicit and we benefit inordinately from this system and we do so little to make it just... justice being God’s prime desire. Woe to us because we are guilty of perpetuating inequality. And God will not be fooled by our protestations of impotence to respond.

But secondly, our riches entangle us, absorb us, concern us. At the extreme, our possessions control us and become our idols, our god in place of the one true God. When we’ll even broach our morals to get a raise, to save a job, to make a sale, we’ve sunk to idolatrous depths. When we are tightfisted with every dollar we have; when we pad our savings accounts and contribute regularly to our investment accounts, but feed not the hungry, nor shelter the homeless, how can we understand our nest eggs anything other than idols standing in the place of God?

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Most of us have known people who have money, business success, envied positions in society—all the things for which the world seems to be striving with such feverish haste and anxiety—everything except one thing—happiness. Towards the end of his life, Sir Cecil Rhodes, the empire builder of South Africa, was congratulated by a reporter on his success. "You ought to be a happy man," said the reporter. Cecil Rhodes replied, "Happy? Good Lord, no!" He went on to say that he spent all his life amassing a fortune, only to find that he now had to spend it all, half on doctors to keep him out of his grave, and the other half on lawyers to keep him out of jail.

The answer, to be sure, was touched with humor and hyperbole but it points to the proverbial truth that worldly achievement and wealth do not insure happiness. In fact, many discover their lofty monuments turning to dust even before they die.

But if the "woes" to the rich do make sense, the "blessings of the poor, the hungry, those hated for Jesus' sake" are harder to see. Jesus seems to be saying that these will be blessed in the life to come, in heaven. OK. But there's more, too.

Jesus is telling the poor, the hungry and the persecuted for His sake that even now, they have access to a fulfillment that the rich, the fed, and the applauded cannot know. Jesus calls it Good News, that while they might be servants, they needn't be servile. They may be victimized, but they need not identify themselves as victims. In the face of oppression, abuse and neglect, in the face of violence, Jesus says to turn the other cheek, go a second mile when forced to go one, giving the shirt of one's back when sued for an overcoat, to emphasize and embarrass the oppressor into changing his ways.

Give me a few minutes more and I could demonstrate for you that all those admonitions from Jesus are exactly the same kind of non-violent resistance to evil, the very tactics<sup>i</sup> that prefigure Gandhi's defiant walk through the British colonial forces to the seashore's salt flats and Dr. King's non-violent resisters turning themselves into human offerings until they were literally overflowing the segregationists' jail cells. In a very real sense these at the bottom of society's ladder demonstrated that they are free in ways those higher cannot know, free enough to reject hate as a tactic and pioneer a new way of freedom for all.

This is not to condone injustice, nor to approve of the *status quo*. It **is** to say that the Good News of Jesus Christ will not be thwarted by the powers and principalities of this world. As the conscience of humanity grows up to envision what some of our finest spirits have already perceived, there will be, God make it soon, an international, interracial, intercultural, interfaith commitment to justice, to peace and to mutual understanding, that will, God make it soon, humble the powerful, the rich, just as it simultaneously lifts and exalts the poor, so that all together as One Human family we welcome in the rule and the way that Jesus inaugurated.

Steve Forbes's private helicopter and yacht will disappear, at the same time as will the homelessness and the hunger of the poor;

Wild and angry street preaching- and even the felt need of it- will disappear, as they and we come to understand our common brokenness and God's burning desire to bring us all home together.

Gardner Taylor said it well, when asked to summarize the whole message of the Bible. He said, "God is out to get back what belongs to God." That's you and me and everyone....Every One. God loves everyone.

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<sup>i</sup> See the powerful work of the biblical scholar Walter Wink for a cogent presentation of these tactics.