

2 October 2016

Good News for *Those People*

Luke 6:17-25; James 2:1-9

We are familiar with the Beatitudes, the blessings with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. But the Gospel of Luke has a slightly different version of those blessings. Listen for the differences. We read Luke 6, verses 17-25:

[Jesus] 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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

'Blessed are you who are poor,

for 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.

'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

'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.'

In Luke 6, Jesus spoke in broad terms about God's concern for people who are poor. His younger brother James didn't speak in generalities, though. We read James 2:1-9:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

All this fall we've been talking about the gospel – the good news of Christ – and some of its ramifications. Briefly, I've described the good news in two steps. First, we human beings were created with the unique purpose of being in relationship with God. But at the same time, by our sin we have separated ourselves from God so that we need God's help to enter into that relationship. But God loves us enough to offer that help, above all in the form of his Son Jesus Christ who bridged the gap from the top down, came to earth as a man, died and rose again, and restored us to communion with God. That's the good news. The second thing, though, stems from that. Since our restoration to God is entirely God's doing, not ours, then none of us are any closer to God than any of the rest of us. There are no privileged groups. All races, all sexes, all ages – all of us are equally in need of grace and equally offered it by the God who loves us all.

Today, though, I have to qualify that slightly. In scripture, there does seem to be at least one group that gets preferential treatment from God: the poor, the wretched, and the miserable of the earth. It doesn't seem fair, but I don't know any other way to read the passage from Luke you just heard. "Blessed are the poor . . . blessed are the hungry . . . blessed are those who mourn . . ." Now, in the Gospel of Matthew these blessings are softened a little bit. There it's "Blessed are the poor *in spirit* . . . blessed are those who hunger *for righteousness* . . ." Not in Luke. Here it's definitely the poor and the hungry, and in case there's any question, Luke adds a few curses: "Cursed are the rich, the well-fed, the laughing. You've gotten your consolation in this world. So you're done. Don't come to me looking for more." And just to take care of any lingering doubts, think about the people Jesus spent time with on earth: the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the lame, the blind, the outcast, the rejected, the leper. In fact, you don't even have to look at the people Jesus hung around with. Just look at Jesus himself. When God came to earth, who did he become? A homeless man.

Put it this way: we were all made in the image of God. But those who do not have homes, who may not have enough to eat, who live on the uncomfortable margins of society, who don't have anyone protecting them – those people don't just bear the image of God. They also bear the image of Christ. The gospel is good news for all. But it seems to be especially good news for those who have the least in this world.

As I've preached about the good news, I've tried every week to ask the next question. If that's the gospel, then what does it mean for the church, as the bearer of Christ's gospel? How well do we, Christ's people, reflect this inclination of Christ's? Not so well, really. In the past century the American church – at least the White American church – has become a middle class phenomenon, inextricably tied to income levels. When the middle class grows, church attendance goes up. When it shrinks, the church declines numerically. And like the rest of society, this is growing more polarized. Demographic studies by income level show that the percentage of poor families who attend church is decreasing rapidly. But I can't tell that anyone cares. There are hundreds of hand-wringing articles out there about how young adults are leaving church and what we must do to get them back, but none about how to bring in more people who struggle financially. You know, the ones Jesus would hang out with.

Now you can't say that the church has forgotten the poor. Nearly every church I know is involved in some community program to help the disadvantaged. (Don't you love our language?

People working three part time jobs who still sometimes have to choose between utilities and groceries are “disadvantaged.”) We ourselves have the Personal Needs Closet, and work closely with the Sunday night community meals at First Pres, and with the Homelessness Coalition. We collect groceries for food pantries and have an Emergency Fund that some of you support faithfully. And these are all good things, excellent things. Read the story about the Personal Needs Closet in the October newsletter. But then look at our reading from James.

If a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

James doesn’t say, “if a poor person in dirty clothes comes in, give him some money or food.” He says, “if a poor person comes in, invite him to sit with you and make him welcome.” You see, before we give things to people, there’s a first step: loving them as equals. It is possible to give someone food and still despise that person in your heart. But if you love someone who is hungry, then giving them food is just natural. Do you see the distinction between the two kinds of giving? The first is “Here, my man, take this money and buy yourself some food” and the second is “Hey, you want half my sandwich?” Giving things to the needy is charity; loving them as equals is gospel.

One of our Methodist founders was the preacher Richard Allen, a former slave who travelled with Francis Asbury as a preaching partner through the colonies and who eventually founded the AME church. In his journals, late in his life, Allen wrote that Methodists had made two critical mistakes in their early years. The first was when they compromised with Southern Methodists and dropped their opposition to slavery – that was why Allen had to form a separate denomination for Black Methodists. And the second, he said, happened when Methodists started wearing fine clothes to church. Why was that a problem? Isn’t that just a way of showing respect? It was a problem because that meant that people who didn’t have fine clothes no longer felt welcome. James would have something to say about that. In fact, he did.

Let me close by telling you about Julia Dinsmore. She’s a poor single mother from Minnesota, currently homeless, living with friends, while she waits for Section 8 housing to come available. (She’s been on the waiting list nine years.) She’s also a poet, and she spoke to our Confirmation mission trip group in July. It’s no exaggeration to say she changed all our hearts. Julia described the poor communities of Minneapolis not as a problem but as a different culture. She called them “my people”: an oral, story-telling culture with a deep clan-like bond to each other that transcends race. Her people can seem rough around the edges. At one point Julia let out a swear word, then said, “Oops. Sorry. Sometimes I slip into my native language.” But they are a people of fierce loyalty, and, believe it or not, they really don’t like charity.

“I get so tired,” Julia said, “of all the people who come in from the suburbs for their drive-by charity.” (Like our mission trip, for instance.) “They come in, spread some gifts around, feel good about themselves, then go home. Don’t get me wrong: if I don’t have food, I’ll go to a food shelf. But I’m sorry, sometimes I don’t have the energy to say ‘Thank you.’ What I want is

to be able to give my family a safe home and enough food by my own work. And when you can't, it wears you out. It's exhausting having to choose between working more hours or taking care of your children. Sometimes I just don't have the strength left to say the words I'm supposed to say to make the volunteers feel good about themselves.

“But you know, one reason that we don't have enough some months is because we've given some of what we have to people who have less. You want to know what the real social safety net in America is, the thing that's *really* keeping poor people's heads above water? Other poor people.”

Julia Dinsmore talked for two hours straight, and we all sat there transfixed. Remember, she's from an oral culture. And then she read us a poem. She had once been a part of a group organizing a housing co-op for a neighborhood, and they just needed an official sponsor for the project, so they applied to a local church. The council chairman of that church replied, “Those people don't need housing. We give them a turkey every Christmas.” So she wrote this poem.

My name is not “Those People.”

I am a loving woman, a mother in pain, giving birth to the future, where my babies have the same chance to thrive as anyone.

My name is not “Inadequate.”

*I did not make my husband leave – he chose to,
and chooses not to pay child support.*

*Truth is though, there isn't a job base for all
fathers to support their families.*

While society turns its head, my children pay the price.

My name is not “Problem and Case to Be Managed.”

I am a capable human being and citizen, not a client.

*The social service system can never replace the compassion
and concern of loving Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, Fathers,
Cousins, Community – all the bonded people who need to be
but are not present to bring children forward to their potential.*

My name is not “Lazy, Dependent Welfare Mother.”

*If the unwaged work of parenting, homemaking and community building was factored into
the Gross National Product, my work would have untold value. And why is it that mothers
whose husbands support them to stay home and raise their children are glorified? And why
don't they get called lazy and dependent?*

My name is not “Ignorant, Dumb or Uneducated.”

I live with an income of \$621 with \$169 in food stamps.

*Rent is \$585. that leaves \$36 a month to live on. I am such a genius at surviving that I could
balance the state budget in an hour.*

Never mind that there is a lack of living-wage jobs.

Never mind that it is impossible to be the sole emotional, social and economic support to a

family.

Never mind that parents are losing their children to the gangs, drugs, stealing, prostitution, social workers, kidnapping, the streets, the predator.

Forget about putting money into schools – just build more prisons.

My name is not “Lay Down and Die Quietly.”

My love is powerful and my urge to keep my children alive will never stop. All children need homes and people who love them. They need safety and the chance to be the people they were born to be. The wind will stop before I let my children become a statistic.

*Before you give in to the urge to blame me,
the blame that lets us go blind and unknowing into
the isolation that disconnects us, take another look.*

Don't go away.

For I am not the problem, but the solution.

And...My name is not “Those People.”