

February 17, 2019
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 175-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 17:5-10

The Gospel reading we just heard is the first part of Luke's Sermon on the Plain. Luke's Sermon on the Plain is very similar to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but there are some important differences that make Luke's account much more challenging. For one thing, Matthew's blessings are "spiritualized," so that "blessed are you who are poor" is rendered instead "blessed are the poor in spirit."¹ For another, Matthew offers eight blessings, while Luke offers four blessings, and he counters them with four woes.

To say it another way, as described in Luke, Jesus sticks with literal poverty, while addressing both ends of the economic spectrum. Luke's Gospel frequently gives particular attention to the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed. In doing so, it also gives particular attention to the rich, the powerful, and the persecutors. In this reading, Jesus speaks in opposing binaries: poor and rich; hungry and full; weeping and laughing; hated and admired. Of course, there is *good* attention, and there is *bad* attention. It's clear which group Jesus tags for God's favor. On the poor-hungry-weeping-hated side is *consolation* with a bucket of blessing; on the rich-full-laughing-admired side is *condemnation* with a bucket of woe.

To set the context, we're still fairly early in Luke's Gospel. Jesus has gone up a mountain and spent the night in silent prayer. With the day's arrival, he assembles his disciples and chooses the twelve known also as the apostles. He returns to "a level place" where there is "a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people." First he heals the people, and then he speaks. But notice that, when Jesus speaks, he addresses, not *the crowd*, but *his disciples*. I'll come back to that in a second.

This is Jesus' first big speech in Luke, and he begins by reaching back a couple of chapters, to the incident in his hometown synagogue. *There*, Jesus read the words of Isaiah from the scroll in the temple and observed that God has appointed *him* to bring good news to the poor. *Here*, Jesus uses his own words, to speak again about the poor.

As I mentioned, Jesus is talking to the disciples, so let's think about how they might have heard this news that isn't good for everyone. My first impulse is to place the disciples among the poor who might find consolation in Jesus' words, dipping, as they listen, from the bucket of blessing, rather than the bucket of woe. If that's correct, it's easy to understand why they are eager to follow Jesus.

But I'm not sure that *is* correct. Last week, we heard Jesus call Peter, James, and John. Their exact social station is unclear, but three fishermen would have had the means to support themselves and their families. Between that story and this one, Jesus called the tax collector Levi, who then in celebration threw Jesus a big party. In other words, those four disciples probably weren't poor by the standards of their day. They would not have suffered the abject poverty, marginalization, or oppression that Luke is alluding to in this passage. On the other hand, neither would they have enjoyed any particular wealth, status, or power.

The disciples probably reside someplace between the two binaries that Jesus describes. As they listen to Jesus speak, they don't dip from the bucket of blessing, but neither do they dip from the bucket of woe. In this passage, Jesus isn't talking *about* the disciples, but he is talking *to* them. For them, following Jesus can't be about seeking consolation or even avoiding condemnation. It must be about something else.

It's natural to hear this passage and think, Where do I fit in? Should I hear *consolation*, or should I hear *condemnation*? For the most part, I expect that, like those disciples, we also reside someplace between the two binaries that Jesus constructs. But we may also need to look beyond them. As with the disciples, Jesus might not be talking *about* us, but he is talking *to* us. He's talking to us, in a language we can understand. Humans seem to like binaries, perhaps because they're so simplifying. Black and white really are so much easier than the shades of gray in between.

The ultimate binary is that of heaven and hell, which culminates in the next life, while having infinite dramatic rehearsals in this one. Reward in one bucket and punishment in the other, God gives us what we deserve. Maybe, but that's probably way too simple. I think this relates to the common American cultural conception of heaven. The expectation seems to be that, in heaven, every person gets their perfect version of life on earth. Death takes you to a place where you get everything you ever wanted when you were alive. It's an odd kind of "Christianity lite" that is disconnected from the more complex demands associated with the in-depth practice of a particular faith tradition.

I don't think heaven works that way, but no matter: in Luke's Gospel, Jesus isn't talking about heaven; he's talking about earth. He's talking about the world and the change that is in progress right then and right now, though it isn't yet complete. Jesus can see it, even if others can't—at least, they can't *yet* see it. We still blame the poor for their poverty, and apparently that's been happening at least as far back as Jesus' time. But God did not give everyone a performance review that the rich passed with flying colors and the poor failed miserably. However the poor ended up in poverty, they are the ones who *are* blessed. I'm using "poor" here as shorthand for all the people we would separate, but whom God favors. Despite popular opinion, despite what we can see, they are the ones who stand, right now, in righteous relationship with God, they are the ones to whom Jesus promised the kingdom of God.

Even that is shorthand. There are a lot of things that we can't see and can't understand. Jesus tries to help us out, but I think we can only take in so much.

Last Sunday during worship we observed the diocese-wide Day of Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation. During my sermon, I quoted The Book of Common Prayer as saying that “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” And I observed that the Episcopal Church understands the ministry of reconciliation as central to the Christian life.

Speaking to a parishioner about it on Monday, this occurred to me: I really have no idea what the fully reconciled kingdom of God will look like. God’s power and potential is vastly beyond anything I can imagine. Anything I can imagine will pale in comparison to what God has in store. Further, and maybe even more important, I don’t want a preview. I don’t want a preview, because I probably wouldn’t like it. It would be so completely beyond the pale, so far outside my ability to comprehend, that my knee-jerk reaction would be a great big and whiny NO WAY! For example, I would be so attached to my own expectations about mercy, about justice, about love, about compassion, about righteousness that I would be completely unable to appreciate God’s astounding hand at work. Those “woes” that Jesus talks about? That would be me, shouting, “Woe is me, that’s not fair!” or, “Woe is me, that can’t be right!” or, “Woe is me, I’m not getting my way!”

The closest we get to a preview comes with readings like the Gospel for today. We can barely get our heads around that. Maybe Jesus knew it would be that way, for those disciples and for us, human beings who aren’t so different from them. Rich or poor or in between, Jesus was trying to explain what for human beings is ultimately unexplainable. Nothing will be as we expect. God is not limited by the limited human imagination. And thank goodness.

The disciples probably understood that. They didn’t follow Jesus because they knew how it would all turn out. They didn’t follow Jesus to seek consolation or to avoid condemnation. They followed Jesus because they had seen the miracles with their own eyes. They had seen people healed and restored. They knew it was only the beginning of what was to come. Jesus said they could help make it happen. Just imagine, they might have said.

Or, maybe, don’t. Maybe, just observe—observe what is right here, right now. We are surrounded by God’s glorious creation and re-creation. See and hear and smell and taste and touch. And then, keep following the miracles.

Notes

¹ Matthew 5:3a, NRSV.