

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
February 16, 2025

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles 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 in 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.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

~Luke 6:17-26

One of my favorite stories about Teresa of Calcutta, better known to us as Mother Teresa, is told by a reporter who was on assignment in Calcutta. He was finishing up his report when he learned to his astonishment that he was just a few doors down from the building where, of all people, Mother Teresa was holding pastoral care sessions. As he tells the story, he felt good about his report, but *this* was something else again, the chance maybe to meet a much-celebrated person and perhaps to have a few words with her, even to write a story or an extended piece about her in her surroundings. This could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, he thought, and so he decided to walk down the road and ask if he might be able to have a moment with her. To his surprise, the person at the front desk said, "Follow me," and off they went, walking down a hallway to a small room where Mother Teresa was meeting with a woman who was about her same age and who, one could see, was suffering from an acute and disfiguring skin disease. The woman was in distress, her eyes distant and downcast. She was holding Mother Teresa's hand. The staff person said gently, "Excuse me, I'm so sorry to interrupt your meeting, but this reporter is here all the way from the United States and he asked if he could speak with you." Mother Teresa looked up at the reporter and said, "Oh that's fine. Which one of us did you want to talk to?" In the

reporter's moving reflection he concludes, "It was clear to me that despite her enormous celebrity and despite the difference in appearance and standing between her and the other woman, her question was a real question and neither answer was any less likely to her than the other. She honestly saw no difference between them."

I thought of this moving story while reflecting on today's gospel because this passage from Luke is one of those moments in the gospel that challenges and pushes and shapes and maybe even, if you let it, changes you, maybe even in something of the way in which she was so clearly changed. It's the gospel at its core and you can see how, for those like Mother Teresa who lived it with such a deep, steady, abiding consistency, it formed and *transformed* them, that its light was in fact that blazing, refining fire promised by John the Baptist that burns away the passing stuff of the world, purifying and returning us to our core, to our real essence, to the love and connectedness that, as we see, hear and learn from Jesus, is our true identity. The reporter's story shows us two souls simply connected, the stuff of the world like celebrity, outsider, worthy or unworthy burned away. The gospel had led a woman who had something we call *status* to live somewhere else, another place far beyond that kind of passing distinction. *And we can call that place: **Blessedness.***

When the gospel is seen as formation or transformation, then suddenly a gospel such as this one begins to make some sense. Ah yes, *blessedness*- that state free from all that divides us, all the stuff of the world that divides us from each other and from God. Blessedness is then an abiding peace and wholeness, a reconciliation or, maybe even more, a *reunion*, a return, a homecoming. I remember one of my great mentors many years ago talking to us about this and she reminded us that the word religion is nothing more than *re-ligio* or relink. For *ligio* think of *ligaments*, she said, all of that which connects. To *re-ligio* or relink is the heart of religion; it's to relink us back to God when we wander, which we do, a lot, and when we separate ourselves from each other, whether that's you and me or "us" and "them." We do that a lot too. Relinking is the heart of the project, as it were, and today's gospel is radiantly and thoroughly a gospel of *relinking*. Blessed are you, the poor, he says, and it's worth noting this isn't about somebody else or a category. Blessed are *you*, he says to those many gathered as he sits and teaches, who are poor, who suffer, who grieve. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst. Blessed are *you* who are wounded and who walk this walk bearing those wounds. Blessed are you in precisely those places where you beseech God from that place of hurt, blessed are you as that place inspires you to relink and reconnect to the God and ground of love; blessed are you precisely in those places where you sit across a table from each other, each knowing what it is to grieve, because we all know it: to lose, to be misunderstood, to feel alone or outside, to not have enough. And then to find that connectedness again knowing that the other knows all of those places just as well and that we can carry each other having found once again that place of connection, that common ground; that we are relinked in that ground of love.

I'll never forget the day my mother died, for of course a whole host of reasons. A memory that lingers equally is the day that followed. I was music director for a wonderful parish in Southport, Connecticut, and we were in the middle of preparations for the Christmas Pageant. The something like 100th annual Christmas Pageant which of course had to be bigger and better and more glorious than ever before and had already been promoted to be all of those things! The directors assured me I didn't need to make the trip down that morning, but it was the day of our final rehearsal and I wanted to be there to sing through all the songs and be sure cast and soloists all felt ready. I never could have anticipated what I found when I arrived. Rehearsal was usually a

fun but rather mad chaos with dozens piled into one room and with me at the piano. But not that morning. I walked in the front door of the church and there in the sanctuary and throughout the building found small groups of children of all ages teaching themselves the music, running their solos, working to get everything right. I ran into one of the directors who said, They decided they wanted to do it for you because they knew you'd be feeling sad. And then as the morning went on and we all came together, each of them said something to me and I'll truly never forget what I saw in their eyes. They looked at me a little bit differently, with a look that said "Alan, I get it. I feel this with you." And it meant so much to me. Nothing was really ever as healing as just those looks of knowing, of "getting it." Much as I loved these kids and had already felt in a real sense linked to them, this was another kind of connection. It said "I want to carry this with you. You and I may be different in age, in place, in experience, but right now we are nothing else but right here together." It was a place of *blessedness*. I didn't agree with all of those kids about everything; not every relationship had been as strong. But on that morning, as I walked through the building I sensed that all of that had been burned away. Those lines, whatever they had been, were gone.

And so finally today, while this extraordinary gospel is, yes indeed, a word of shaping, of refining, of relinking and transforming, it's also a potent word of something else. It's a word of *hope*. And as much as Jesus was a profound spiritual teacher, and as much as his sermons on the mount and plain push us into new spiritual territory, as they surely do, he was also a teacher and a giver of ultimate and unshakeable hope. And I would suggest in closing that hope is also very much at the heart of what he offers so vividly today. Blessed are you, he says- blessed are you who know and who have chosen this way, he says; blessed are you called to this rather counterintuitive and not always easy way, who have said yes to this way of listening, of bearing and of linking. Blessed are you who are able to say no to the world's bullying and to its system of caste and rank, class and division; blessed are you, he says, because none of that is real; it all too shall pass; only love endures. Blessed are you, in short, who crave the connectedness that is true blessedness, because that kingdom has come and God's *will*, yes, in fact will be done on earth as in heaven. Ignore those lines, live this life, he says to all gathered; relink because *that* is the kingdom; *that* is the kingdom that comes and arrives and heals and redeems and makes whole, that is God's will done on earth as in heaven, and *that* is the only kingdom that matters. Thanks be to God. Amen.