

Sermon Epiphany 6C
February 17, 2019
Rev. Ginger Litman-Koon

It took us 30 minutes by bus to travel from our lodging to the tiny village of Santa Maria, where we'd been told the worksite would be. When we got off the bus we were advised to cover our faces to keep from breathing in the dust, but as we looked out over the quiet Santa Maria school yard and community garden, I didn't see any dust blowing. Then we started walking.

Twenty Americans began the half-mile trek up the dirt "roads" that led to the site, and the powdery red dust began billowing around us. The only "traffic" we had to pass as we walked was the ox-cart that carried the water to the build site every morning. We'd need the water to make mortar and concrete. That week, we'd arrived at the home of Josue and Maria Gonzalez, to work alongside them and their children to build a one-room house for their eldest daughter, Anais, and her husband to move into.

Anais had recently married, and when we first received the writeup on the family we'd read that they were especially excited that they'd been approved for a home-build through Habitat for Humanity, because they recently found out they were expecting their first child. However, when we arrived on the site a few days later, we learned that a kidney infection had caused an end to Anais' pregnancy, due to a lack of access to common antibiotics.

Their loss didn't seem to expel their excitement over owning their first home, although we underwent the sobering realization that many of us traveled with a round of antibiotics, just in case. We worked side by side with the Gonzales family that week to complete a safe, new home for this hopeful young couple. Another group had been there before us to build a sanitary outhouse and shower facility for the family to share. And by the end of the week, Anais and her husband had a new house built with reinforced concrete walls, to withstand the common earthquakes in the region, and a concrete floor, to help protect against the parasitic diseases they had been exposed to, sleeping inches from the dirt floor in the house Josue and Maria share with their two other children.

"Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus says. "Blessed are you who are hungry." "Blessed are you who weep," Jesus says.

How can that be so? How, Jesus, can you say that the poor and the hungry are blessed? How can you say that Josue and Maria, struggling to raise their children in a wobbly shack they built from scrap material, are blessed? How can you say Anais, who suffered a miscarriage due to a lack of access to basic health care, is blessed?

And here at home, how can you say that the millions of families here in the US struggling to make ends meet, those going bankrupt due to medical bills. or the homeless individuals living on the streets of our cities, are blessed? Jesus, how can you say "Blessed are the poor?" By all accounts, by

anyone's standards, they are not "blessed." They're not today - and they were likely worse off in Jesus' day. Blessed is happy, healthy, and fulfilled. Blessed cozy, warm and comfortable. Blessed is a safe house to come home to, and a family that loves you. Blessed is having everything we need...right?

Luke sets the stage for his version of the Beatitudes by telling us that when he begins this teaching, Jesus was surrounded by hordes of people pressing in around him, trying to touch him, so that they could be healed. They were people from Jerusalem - some perhaps who had been following him since his baptism in the Jordan. They were people from all around Judea: the sick, the demon-possessed, the outcast. They were people from all the way up in Tyre and Sidon: the non-believers, the pagans, people who spoke other languages, and people of different skin-colors.

In a culture strictly defined by hard-and-fast class lines, Jesus was attracting people from all sectors of society, from all backgrounds. He was being watched from afar by the concerned elites, and surrounded on all sides by the poor, the hungry, the huddled masses yearning to be set free. People had heard of this healing rabbi, and they traveled as far as it took to see him, to touch him, to hear him for themselves. And those who came to him from the lower echelons of society or from minority faith traditions - they had no false hopes - they knew that they would likely hear a word of judgment from this famous holy man.

In this kind of honor-shame culture, those who came from the outside fully expected to be shamed for their marginal status. Those who were sick fully expected to be told just what sin they had committed to earn divine punishment. The poor and the hungry crowded around Jesus fully expecting to be put in their place. But instead, from the lips of the Master, they are not shamed...they are blessed. They are not told to take their place...they are healed. They are not told how to earn God's favor...they are told instead that they are favored by God.

That day, the "unwashed masses" crowded in around Jesus, fully expecting to be browbeaten by another moralistic evangelist come-to-town, but instead, they were invited to come and take a front-row seat for God's message of GRACE.

God knows it isn't the way of the world to bless the poor - It isn't in the nature of the world to honor the hungry. It isn't the instinct of the world to comfort the afflicted and welcome in the hated. But it is the way of the Kingdom, and the way of the Kingdom is Grace. Grace. It means that your status in God's eyes has nothing to do with your standing in society... that being complete has nothing to do with material possessions... that you are welcome, you are loved, you are forgiven - no matter your background or your past - because God's welcome is not earned by our merit, but is given freely because of Christ's.

Grace. It was a shock to those who would receive it unexpectedly that day, and it was a challenge to those who were convicted by it - the ones who found themselves on the "woe" side of the Beatitudes- those who have enough, who are never hungry - the well-fed, the comfortable, the satisfied, the included. To be completely honest, if we ask ourselves, it still challenges us today. In our constant

desire to gain that “insider status,” to get a leg up in the world, to surround ourselves with the things that will keep us comfortable and secure, we are constantly battling the two-sided coin of Grace.

Because if Grace says that the poor, hungry, mourning and outcast are the better positioned to receive God’s kingdom than the rich, then where do we fall on that spectrum? Is Jesus saying that we who live well will encounter barriers to entering the kingdom? Does that mean that we are not **gasp** first in line??

We as the church in the more affluent places of this world are always going to be tempted to push back against the message of radical inversion that comes with the gospel. We are going to constantly be drawn to other messages that make us feel better about our status and relative wealth.

As I was considering this point this week, I began reading some literature from “popular” American preachers - especially some who are on TV. And it shocked me - first of all how popular these megachurch pastors are - thousands and thousands of followers, adherents and attendees - but secondly, just how contrary their messages are to what we hear this week in the Beatitudes.

Let’s do a little exercise. I’m going to read some quotes from some of today’s most listened-to preachers, but before each, I’m going to ask Pastor Kris to read a line from the Beatitudes:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

“God wants all Christians to be Prosperous” (Benny Hinn)

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”

“If you want to reap financial blessings, you have to sow financially.” (Joel Osteen)

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

“You ain’t gonna have no love and joy and peace until you get some money.” (Creflo Dollar)

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.”

“God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money,
to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us.” (Joel Osteen)

Hm... The messages sound pretty different, don’t they? But is it any wonder that these preachers have such big followings? The message they’re selling is a lot more palatable to our American sensibility than Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes. For us who are, for the most part, not the poor, hungry and the outcast, It’s a lot easier for us to accept a message of relative prosperity than it is for us to swallow the truth of God’s Grace. Even if the message of the prosperity Gospel tastes better going down, in truth, it does not satisfy. Chasing the carrot of wealth and security always leaves us hungry for more.

If we read the “woes” that Jesus lays out today in the Beatitudes against riches and inclusion in this world, we see that they are not a curse on the wealthy, but more of a warning, because he knows that placing our trust in wealth and status won’t come close to bringing us the peace that comes with the Kingdom. Because that’s the blessing his Beatitudes bestow: Peace - Shalom - wholeness - contentedness - not according to the standards of society, but according to the standards of the kingdom

and by the measure of Grace.

When we hear the words of Jesus today, “Blessed are you who are poor...” Luke points out that he is looking directly at his disciples. He is speaking this message to them, because these are the realities of the life they have entered. They’ve left their homes, their families, their livelihoods...all sense of comfort and security has been left behind to follow a life with their Lord and Master. The life of discipleship may not drive one to abject poverty, but it will be a life of letting go, of giving up on the empty promises of the world in order to embrace the promises of God, a life of letting go of the riches of the world in order to embrace the riches of the kingdom.

Jesus says to his newly called disciples, “Rejoice...and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.” I don’t think what he was saying here was, “If you’re poor now, Just wait till you get to heaven - and then you’ll be OK.” Or “If you’re hungry now - don’t worry! You’ll have plenty to eat in heaven.” When Jesus says your “reward is great in heaven,” he’s not referring to some spiritual bank account up in the sky where you rack up rewards for every loss you suffer on earth. I think he’s saying that when you are poor, or hungry, or experiencing loss, or saying the difficult “no” to the temptation and corruption, that the rewards of the kingdom of heaven are accessible to you, here and now.

That when life is not congested by the rat-race of trying to accumulate the riches of earth, then we are freed more and more to receive the riches of heaven. And the riches of heaven alone can truly satisfy. They are the peace that passes all understanding, the wholeness that comes with knowing Christ, the Grace to live as children of God.

Today, we celebrate with Henry William Grant, that through Holy Baptism, he has become an inheritor of those riches. Through water and the Word, he has been reborn a child of God, and now will live each day loved, forgiven, and freed to be whole, to be covered with God’s grace, to know that no matter what this world throws at him, he is enough.

The life we baptize Henry into is not always going to be easy - especially as he grows, and begins to hear the lure of false prophets and has to stand up to temptation and sin. BUT, he does not embark on this journey alone. As he grows in faith and in trust of the God who claims him and loves him and calls him by name, He'll hear the Word of God lifting him up, and guiding him, through the voices of his loving mom & dad, through the faithfulness of his entire family, and through his church family, to whom he is now united by the blood of Christ through the waters of baptism.

In baptism, we are not promised prosperity. We are not promised an easy life, or a comfortable existence - We’re not even promised good health - But we are promised the kingdom - and for “the immeasurable riches of God’s Grace,” (as Ephesians says) we are willing, with Christ’s help, to forsake all else.

At the end of our Habitat build week in Nicaragua, the community of Santa Maria threw a party. Work always ends a couple hours early on the last day of a Habitat trip, so that a celebration can be held in honor of the new home. There was music, dancing, limbo and, of course, a pinata for the kids.

The whole neighborhood came out to celebrate the completion of this new home, and there was a smile on every face.

I love looking back at the photos of that closing celebration, to see the pride and joy on the faces of the Gonzalez family, celebrating what God had done for them through this opportunity, to see the support of the neighbors who rallied around them, not to envy what they had received, but to share in their joy...

I'll never forget the one little neighbor girl - she was about 7 or 8 years old. She showed up to the party with her hair pulled back in two shiny black braids, wearing the most stunning red party dress. She was beaming at the opportunity to show off this dress, that was about two sizes too big, and she proudly sidestepped the yard chickens to get onto the dusty dance floor.

Then to contrast that, we volunteers were still in our work clothes, drenched in sweat, plastered with that red clay dust, and worn out from a week of construction under the hot sun - but smiling, just letting go and rejoicing in the work done together. But above all, what you can see in the photos on all of our faces is that - whether we were dressed in party dresses or sweaty t-shirts, we were blessed. All of us - The Gonzales family, the community, and us volunteers.

The family was blessed, not because this one-room house was going to end their life of poverty - it wasn't. We were blessed, not because building it made us their saviors - it didn't. We were blessed because through this week of working side by side, we experienced God's Grace - Grace that is not satisfied with the suffering of God's children... Grace that is not satisfied with hearts grown hardened toward the needs of the poor... Grace which calls us out of lives defined by class, rank or status, and instead unites us, through the waters of baptism, as one beloved family of God living and working for the Kingdom.