

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Epiphany 6, Year C, February 17, 2019
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Blessings?"
Luke 6:17-26

today's Gospel passage is probably somewhat familiar to you; you may recognize it as one version of the Beatitudes, the 'blessed are' verses; yet most people are less familiar with Luke's version, here, known as the 'Sermon on the Plain,' or "level place," than with Matthew's version (5:1-12), known as the 'Sermon on the Mount'

Matthew's version includes "blessed are the meek ... the merciful ... the pure in heart ... the peacemakers..."; nine groups of people are said to be blessed in all; Luke's version has only four groups of people who are blessed: the poor ... the hungry ... those who weep ... and those who are hated; Luke's do not sound much like 'blessings' in our usual understanding of the word, do they?

and notice that where certain blessings are found on both lists, Matthew's are more spiritualized, while Luke's are more direct and down to earth; Matthew's blessings includes the "poor in spirit" where Luke's are simply the "poor;" Matthew's includes those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" where Luke those who are simply "hungry;" Matthew's blessings also seem like they are more rewards that will be put off until the next life, while Luke's involve the life in the here and now

and the other big difference is that Matthew only has blessings, while Luke's list of blessings is paired with a "woe to you" list; the title, 'the Beatitudes,' seems to suggest that there are only blessings, and blessings that everyone would agree are blessings; that ignores "the woes" completely; we'd rather forget about those; but let's look closely at Luke's woes, and try to hear how they are Gospel, how they are good news, for us

Luke says "woe to you who are rich ... who are full ... who are laughing ... and who are spoken well of;" I don't believe this means that God does not ever want us to experience richness, or fullness, or laughing, or being respected; these are not bad in and of themselves; but I believe that Jesus was carefully warning us that those four experiences may often distract us from God; each one of those four, or especially the combination of all of them, could lead us to

think we have all that we need in life, and be satisfied with our creature comforts, without God in our lives

can you see how limited your life would be if all that you had were such creature comforts? think how limited your life would be if it were missing God; without God in our lives, any or all of these comforts fall far short of the fullness of a life lived with a recognition of God's place in our lives; none of these creature comforts has anywhere near the value, and especially not the eternal value, of living a life of faith with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit

think of your own life; think of times that you were in need, hardship, or want of money or food; when you knew you didn't have all the resources you needed; when you experienced grief or loss; or times when people didn't look up to you, or understand you, or make a place for you; think of any time when purely human resources have failed you; did you feel nearer to God or further from God in times like those?

in my experience, it was during just these kinds of difficult times that I have especially recognized my dependence upon God, and consequently then I really saw God at work in my life; knowing that God is there when we need God; seeing how God has provided for us when we couldn't provide for ourselves; understanding how God's love gets worked out over the long run for us – that is the great blessing we receive from such hard times

we also learn from the Beatitudes that we have an active part to play in bringing a true sense of blessing to those who are experiencing difficulties in their lives when we are not experiencing them in our lives

we can help bring blessings to those who are poor and hungry by sharing our resources with those in need; by participating in ministries such as our Food Pantry, Thrift Shop, donations for students' backpacks or for the school in Haiti, and a host of other social support ministries; and by recognizing that money and material things are not our ultimate source of meaning or of happiness, we can cultivate the spiritual discipline of simple living

we can help bring blessings to those who weep from misfortune, or loneliness, or illness, or grief; through the kinds of ministries of visiting our homebound, praying with or for those who are ill and mourning, and providing meals and

companionship, either through the programs of the parish or what you pursue on your own; and by recognizing that pursuing happiness for its own sake is not our ultimate source of meaning or of true happiness, we can cultivate the spiritual discipline of compassion

we can help bring blessings to those who are hated or excluded, by stepping out of our comfort zones, by welcoming those who do not get welcomed elsewhere, and by treating people the way that Jesus treated people in his life; and by recognizing that social standing is not our ultimate source of meaning or of happiness, we can cultivate the spiritual discipline of humility

through all of these actions, ministries, and recognitions, God gives us different kinds of blessings: the blessing of knowing we are sharing in God's work; the blessing of a closer walk with God; and the blessing of closer relationships with other children of God; I pray that each of us may receive and share such blessings, and receive and share them abundantly