

EPIPHANY 6 C

Luke 6:17-26

Blessed are the Cheese Makers

In the Monty Python movie *"Life of Brian"*

Jesus goes up on the mountain side to teach the people.

There is a huge crowd gathered around him – so huge

that some of the people who are on the outer edge of the crowd

cannot hear his words and must ask others

what the master has said.

As Jesus pronounces what have become known as the Beatitudes –

one of the characters in the movie – desperate to know

what Jesus is saying asks a man who is ahead of him in the crowd

"What is he saying – What is he saying?"

The man checks with a person in front of him,

who in turn checks with someone else and then the message

is relayed back – the Master says:

"Blessed are the Cheese makers."

I have titled my sermon today, ***"Blessed are the Cheese Makers"***

as a way of reminding us how often we get wrong

what Jesus has said, and as a way of making us think about

who is blessed and who is not.

Who are the blessed ones anyway? Who is it that God favors?

And who is it that God looks askance at?

Who is it that God warns – that God threatens –
with troubles and woes?

If you listen to the average preacher on Sunday morning television
the answer seems clear.

Those who succeed in life are the ones that God favors:

Those who gather in their three-piece suits
and their fancy dresses in churches made of glass and steel
and who have a smile on their face – dollars in the pockets –
two well behaved children beside them –
and a nice car in the parking lot –
these are the blessed –
while those who struggle with depression and despair –
those who live and work – when they can –
in the ghettos and the cabbage towns
of North America,
and those who perform menial tasks each day –
those who serve others rather than living as their equals –
and whose children get less than perfect marks at school. –

These are the cursed and the afflicted.

But is it true? Is this what Jesus taught?

The author of the third gospel – the Physician we know as Luke – clearly thought a fair bit about how we get mixed up about whom God blesses and whom God does not.

I say that because of Luke's account of what we call the ***Sermon on The Mount*** is different than Matthew's version.

Luke doesn't contradict what Matthew had to say, rather he gives us a different view of Jesus' sermon, and in some ways a clearer view – a more helpful view.

First, in Luke, the sermon is not set on a hillside – where Jesus can look over the top of the crowd and hand down the word from on high to those who are beneath him as it were – rather, it is set on a plain – on a level place where a large crowd has gathered and pressed in upon him – and where Jesus has been walking among them – healing their diseases and curing their afflictions.

And second, Jesus not only is portrayed by Luke as announcing

who is blessed by God – a list that is somewhat more graphic and more tangible, than Matthew's list – Jesus also is portrayed as announcing a series of matching curses or woes:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God –
woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled –
woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh –
woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you,
revile you, and defame you on the account of the Son of Man,
woe to you when all speak well of you,
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Think about it. What does this list say about our aspirations?

About our dreams? About our rushing out to buy lottery tickets
so that we might win the big one?

About our parties and our attempts to fill our days
with mindless diversions and endless entertainments?

And what does it say about the value of our sorrow, our pain,

and our hunger? What does this list of blessings and woes say about what God is about? About where God is? About who God is for?

William H Willimon writes:

For Jesus, there was something more dangerous than tears.

It was the dangerous deception that our world is secure, stable, the best of all possible worlds – don't worry, be happy.

Jesus warns of that deception. ***"Woe to you that laugh now.***

Woe, if you feel too good,

settled too comfortably with the way things are...

To hope too soon, to laugh too easily, is self deception –

the reduction of the Christian hope to election campaign fluff."

God reverses all our expectations –

the expectations that we learn from the world – and I am glad of it.

I need to know that God understands my pain

my poverty, my despair, my sin, my fear;

I need to know that God is with me the way that I really am

and that the image of joy and success, and happiness

and prosperity that is portrayed 24 hours a day on television,

that image that I can't make real for myself,

no matter how hard I work, is a false image,
is a false image of blessedness.

I need to know that God is beside me, where I live, on the plain –
on the level, where I am sick, and in need –
where I struggle to do what is right
and where I fight to retain my faith.

I need to know that I can touch Jesus and be touched by him –
right here and right now; that I don't have to have all the answers
or understand all the mysteries, or be joyfully confident
for him to care for me.

A woman was talking to me once at the Winfield nursing home
about her experiences in caring for her ailing mother.

She told me how precious her time with her mother is.

How she feels so privileged to be able to be there with her,
to see her mother smile what might be one of her last smiles,
and to hear her mother say in her quiet, fading,
trembling voice – I love you.

She used the word blessed as she talked about
the opportunity she had to be with her mother,

and she described herself as being blessed

by the work she is doing for her mother:

blessed in the changing of her mother's diapers

blessed in the wiping of spit from her mother's chin,

blessed in the chance to puree her mother's food

and feed it to her one spoonful at a time,

blessed in praying for her and holding her

as she finally falls asleep at night.

I have a chance, she said, to love my mother,

a chance to give a little bit back to her, that she gave to me.

I feel so lucky to be able to do this,

so lucky to be able to cry over what Mom has lost,

so lucky to be able to reach out and touch her

and make her days a bit easier.

The promise of Christ in both the sermon on the mount

in the Gospel according to Matthew,

and in the sermon on the plain in the Gospel according to Luke,

is that there is joy on the other side of grief,

laughter on the other side of tears,

fulfilment on the other side of hunger,

and joyful reward on the other side of the abuse
and the ridicule we receive because we cling to him
and live in a way that is strange to the world –
a way that is opposed to the world's way.

I love a good time. I like a good joke.

I am pleased when I can forget my problems
and the problems of the world around me.

There is nothing quite like a fine meal and a bit of fun
when the day is done.

I feel good when I can shut out the troubles of the world around me
and just relax. But I feel God's presence most –

I feel God's power most, not in the good times, the easy times –
the times when I am blind to the pain within me
and the pain around me. I feel God's power most –

his presence most – when I am helping someone who is in need.

I feel it most when someone touches me and looks me in the eye
and says to me – God understands – Jesus was where you are,
he had doubts, uncertainties, fears, he had no home
to call his own – no friends that he could really count on

when times got tough, he wept and he cried and got angry too

and God was with him in all those times

and God strengthened him and gave him the victory.

My friends, God can work with us.

God can accomplish something for us and in us and through us –

when we are open to him in our need.

What God can't deal with, because we don't let God deal with it,

is our plastic smiles, our blithe ignorance, our self-righteousness,

and our couldn't-care-less attitudes

toward those who are in need around us.

Happiness, blessedness is not found in wealth,

in three square meals a day, in mindless laughter,

or in the good opinions that others may have of us.

Blessedness is found surrendering – in letting go –

in knowing our need and the need of the world around us

and in knowing that God really cares about those needs,

that God is really present with us to meet those needs

and that God will vindicate all those

who cling to him in the midst of those needs – to him,

and not to the god of material success,

or the god of self-reliance or the god of blind happiness.

Blessedness is found in trusting in God

and in doing the works of God,

the works of loving and caring

and healing and sharing and forgiving.

Blessed are the cheese makers – for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Perhaps there is more wisdom in this mishearing of Jesus's words

than in the distortions that we see in the world around us today.

Blessed are the cheese makers who do their best for one

one-hundredth of what baseball player receives

and the factory workers who share their jobs

rather than taking overtime.

Blessed are the single moms who struggle to

feed and clothe their children and to teach them self-respect,

and the lonely widowers who weep and who visit those

who have suffered the same kind of loss as they.

Blessed are the daughters who nurse their dying mothers

rather than leaving them to strangers

and the fathers who spend time with their children

instead of spending extra time at the office getting ahead.

Blessed are those who are rooted in faith

and who share what they have, materially and spiritually,
with others.

Blessed are those who know their need, and who trust in God,

for they are like trees planted by streams of water.

Their leaves do not wither, in all that they do they prosper. Amen.