

The Price is Right
February 13, 2022
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Sermon Text: Luke 6:17-26

I was raised by two parents that were quite the penny pinchers. My grandparents were children during the Great Depression so they passed a lot of the sense of scarcity on to my parents who then (attempted) to pass it on to me. My parents watched every cent that came through our house. I remember them balking at buying me Hot Wheels toy cars because they were too expensive! I had to do with Matchbox toy cars instead, which at the time were a cheap version of Hot Wheels. If I wanted Hot Wheels, I had to buy them with my own money. As an adult, I now know and really appreciate my parents' frugality, because while I didn't have a room full of Hot Wheels cars, we always got to go on vacation each year. Today, those Hot Wheels would be in a landfill somewhere, but the memories of our vacations are very precious to me. While I didn't turn out quite as frugal as my parents, I did remember one specific piece of money advice they taught me, which was to think of how much time you worked to buy an item before you buy it. They taught me that if you think the item is still worth buying after this mental exercise, then it is something you really want. This taught me to really be aware of the cost of material things in terms of how much of your life you are giving up. Jesus in today's passage in Luke 6:17-26 talks about the true cost of following him and how contrary to the way of the world the path of discipleship is.

¹⁷ He came down with them 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. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were

troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. ²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²² “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³ 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. ²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ “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. ²⁶ “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

This passage is often called the “Sermon on the Plain” in contrast to Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” and the two passages do have some similarities, particularly in the proclamations of blessings that are in both “sermons”. Biblical scholars have debated if they are two interpretations of the same set of teachings, or two different traditions of teachings that Jesus delivered. Luke’s recollections of Jesus’ sayings are shorter and more to the point, while Matthew’s are wordier and more detailed. (For example, Luke’s “Blessed are you poor” becomes Matthew’s “Blessed are the poor in spirit”) This has led some scholars to think that Matthew is trying to spiritualize Luke’s more “earthy” statements.

We can understand why Matthew may have wanted to spiritualize these passages. They are difficult to hear! As it has been clear from the Luke passages we have studied during Epiphany, Luke’s Jesus doesn’t just want to slowly change the world; he wants to usher in a dramatic, sudden reversal of the world’s values. The Jesus of Luke knows the values of God are

not the values of human society. We have seen this in Luke already from the mouth of Mary in the Magnificat in Luke 1 and in Jesus' first public proclamation in Luke 4.

Thus, when Jesus opens his mouth to teach his disciples (and those in the large crowd who were close enough to hear), Luke records Jesus at his most unfiltered, without any pretense of trying to soften the blow of his words. These words are directed right at the disciples (notice how much Luke uses "you"!) while Jesus is looking right at them. You can feel the emphasis Jesus is placing on these words. He wants to make sure the disciples really hear them. They are an important piece of what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus begins by telling the disciples who will be blessed by the coming of the kingdom; those who are poor, hungry, sad, and defamed. Then in perfect symmetry he discusses four "woes" upon others; the rich, full, happy, and praised. These lists are perfectly balanced to highlight the complete opposition of the values of the Kingdom of God with the values of human society.

The last contrast of each list is connected to the costly path of following Jesus and serve to anchor the entire discussion of these lists into that context. Jesus here is not just making a statement about socio-economic issues related to wealth, although Jesus' concern for the poor is evident throughout the Gospels. He is making a statement about how wealth and the pursuit of the social status intersects with the call to be a committed disciple of Jesus.

If you remember last week's sermon you know that the disciples left behind their former lives to follow Jesus. They left behind their jobs, their friendships and their families. They replaced these things with poverty, hunger and sadness about the things they have left

behind. They exchanged the love and comfort of family and tribe for the exclusion from society that comes with following a homeless street preacher. The blessings section of the sermon is to assure the disciples that these sacrifices are not in vain; that they are currently experiencing the Kingdom of God and through that experience, they *will* be filled and experience true joy, both in this life and the next.

But to this reassuring section Luke records Jesus as proclaiming “woes” against those on the other side of the fence; those who have wealth, food and laughter and whose presence is always spoken of with approval. Why does Jesus do this? Is he saying that we are only blessed when we are miserable? Is he saying that we should choose to be poor? No, I don’t believe so, but Jesus is giving us a warning about how the values of human society can pollute and distract from our faith.

In many other places in the Gospels, Jesus teaches that wealth, power and social status can be an obstacle to truly following Jesus. The story of the “rich young ruler” that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is just one example. Later in Luke, Jesus tells us that we “cannot serve God and wealth”. The apostle Paul in 1 Timothy famously reminds us “But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith.” (1 Timothy 6:9-10)

I know that when anyone from a church starts talking about money, we get uncomfortable thinking that this is just another pitch to give more to the church and thus to the person speaking. The point of this passage is not to persuade us to give more to the church. It is

to realize that often we are chasing wealth for a deeper reason more harmful to our faith, which is the acceptance of honor from others. When we value the acceptance of others higher than following Jesus, we have made ourselves the center of our lives, rather than God. Jesus makes the clear link between the poor, who are treated poorly by others and the rich, who are treated well by others. This is the real issue. Does what people think of us affect how we practice our faith in a negative way? (This includes how we spend our wealth, which is one of the things that is most visible to others.)

One of the ways I teach our youth is through the stories of various Christian saints. I feel that these stories are a great way to relate to the teachings of Jesus in a practical way throughout history. The youth are often amazed at the level of generosity and hospitality shown in these stories. The most common reaction when I ask how could we be like the saints today is “if you did that, people would think you’re crazy!” They have a great point! Are we willing to be seen as a little crazy or a little too radical in our generosity and hospitality? Are we willing to evaluate the choices we make in life not by the values of human society but by the values of the Kingdom? Are we willing to count the cost? If not, why not? What is holding us back? I pray that each of us will find ways we can better follow Jesus and change not just our lives, but the lives of our church, community, and country. Amen.

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