

Jesus Calling, Part 2

Jeremiah 17:5-10 Luke 6:17-26

Last week we looked at Jesus' calling of the first disciples—to 4 fishermen: Peter and his brother, and James and John. It's a winsome and joyful call to purpose and potential. As we read on in Luke, we learn that Jesus spends a night on a hillside to pray. As a result of that night of prayer he chooses 12 apostles—his band of close apprentices whom he wants to spend more time with to teach and train in the Way of the Kingdom. Directly following that is our account for this morning, and we will see that his first lesson for them is going to be straight-to-the-point, and somewhat startling.

Jesus has been up on a hillside, he's called the 12 to be his close followers, and here is where we pick it up in Luke 6:

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

Note: Jewish listeners would have had a gut reaction to hearing this, that people from Tyre and Sidon were following. That's code for "dangerous people." When we read the Old Testament we see that Israel and the people of Tyre and Sidon had a history of conflict and violence. For example, the wicked queen Jezebel was from that region, and she was one of people who killed the truth-telling prophets, among other terrible things she did. So, to put this in today's terms, for Jesus to have followers from Tyre and Sidon would be the equivalent of Jesus standing in Israel today and everyone being told that he had followers from Palestine and

Lebanon. Which is true—there are many Palestinian Christians and Lebanese Christians. This is all to say, Jesus had followers from all around the region, and he welcomed their discipleship. Just because someone is from another country or culture, it doesn't mean they're bad people.

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. (Luke likes to remind us of Jesus' healing work!)

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples (that would be all of the followers there, and not just the 12 apostles) 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 is the word of the Lord.

See what I mean by straight to the point and startling?

In the Gospel of Jesus, and particularly with these words this morning, we have what has been called the Great Reversal, where Jesus reverses conventional understanding of who is seen as truly blessed. This has also been called the announcement of the Upside-Down Kingdom. Where Jesus turns everything on its head, revealing *God's* perspective—this is the world as *God* sees it. Jesus said similar things when he said the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. The least shall be the greatest, and the greatest shall be the least, and so forth.

This teaching in Luke is similar to the 8 beatitudes of Matthew, but there are no woes in Matthew's version of the beatitudes. In Luke there are 4 blessings and 4 woes, as Jesus lifts up as blessed those whom society kicks to the curb, and demotes those whom society elevates as blessed. Or, perhaps, they are people who elevate *themselves* as blessed.

And while this may sound like it comes as a challenging, if not startling, word out of the blue, *we've actually heard this before in Luke's gospel*—in a couple places: after his baptism, Jesus teaches in the synagogue in his hometown and reads and interprets Isaiah 61, when he gives his inaugural address. Isaiah 61 says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to preach *good news to the poor*, freedom *for the oppressed*,” and so on. And then, let's go all the way back to Advent, specifically to Mary's song (the Magnificat), where she sings, “God has

scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

So, with this pronouncement of blessings and woes, Jesus is reiterating God’s policy statement, if you will, of the Kingdom of God, and where that will lead them now that they are officially assembled as a group of 12 apostles and a large band of disciples. This reiteration of it, however, is a little more stark and straightforward; Jesus uses some salty language here, but it’s consistent with Luke’s presentation of who Jesus is and what he is about. Namely, that Jesus’ heart goes out to the poor and those in deep need. His heart goes out to *all*, to be sure, but he is announcing that he is going to include and elevate those whom society has excluded and viewed as *not* having God’s favor.

This is prophetic speech, like the prophets of the Old Testament. Like Jeremiah, who used some stark and salty language himself in the passage that David read. In fact, Jeremiah uses even *stronger* language in his pronouncement of blessings and woes: he uses the word “cursed” to describe those who trust in themselves and not God. Did Jeremiah really mean that? And did Jesus really mean what he said?

It helps to understand the role of the prophets, and how they spoke.

Because Jesus spoke and acted in the prophetic tradition throughout his ministry.

The prophets could be described as alarm clocks; their job is to wake people up. Not with 98.1 King f.m. on your radio, a gentle awakening of soft classical music. We're talking the old wind-up alarm clock with the bell on top that startles you awake with an ear-piercing metallic rattle.

The prophets use a lot of images, sometimes startling ones, sometimes over the top, sometimes with vivid contrasts, to wake people up out of their slumber; to clear their sleepy eyes so they can see as God wants them to see, and then take appropriate action and live according to God's vision of the world.

Jesus is solidly in that prophetic tradition. The prophet's goal is to jar people out of their complacency, to see the world as God sees it, to have their heart go out to others, the way God's heart goes out—especially to those in greatest need—and then do as God does in creating a just world.

That's a two-minute summary of prophets for you!

Now, perhaps you were wondering what I have wondered when I've heard these words from Jesus. And that is, with the woes in particular, is he speaking to me? To us? I can affirm Jesus blessing the poor and hungry and those in grief, but "*Woe to you who are rich*"?? Is that directed at me, and all of us? After all, by

the world's standards, we are rich, in many ways. "*Woe to you who are full now*"? Is that spoken to us? I mean, we are full—we don't go hungry, right? "*Woe to you who laugh now*?" We laugh now. I laugh every day; in fact, it's kind of a goal. I need to laugh. Without a sense of humor, I can get a bad case of seriousitis. So, am I in trouble? Am I getting you in trouble by helping you laugh from time to time, thus getting *me* into deeper trouble?

And, what do we do about the fact that Jesus had rich disciples who followed him (Matthew the tax collector was probably one of the wealthier ones), and, Jesus reached out to wealthy people like Zacchaeus. Luke tells us he was rich. No woes upon Zacchaeus; only grace and salvation. They ate dinner together at his house. In fact, Jesus gave Zacchaeus the same kind of attention and care that he gave to poor people. What do we do with that?

Again, it helps us to understand the prophetic nature of Jesus' language, the startling nature of prophetic speech, as a way of shining a bright light into the darkness of some people's complacency, and to provide an opportunity for an attitude check on the part of his listeners. Because this is really about attitude, and it's a matter of heart and one's heart orientation toward life and toward others. Not necessarily the amount of money in someone's bank account, or if they get three meals a day, or whether someone literally laughs.

It's about someone being aware of their true need, in humility, like Zacchaeus did, and seeking mercy from God, like Zacchaeus did—and like the hurting and the poor do, especially when they aren't receiving help and mercy from anywhere else.

This teaching from Jesus is, at heart, about the difference between those who are clearly *aware of their need* and are *in a place of need* and helplessness for whatever reason, and those who are *self-satisfied* and who have made their purpose in life to be self-fulfilled, and to be spoken well of by others.

Eugene Peterson's Message translation captures this well: *"It's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. It's trouble ahead if you're self-satisfied. And it's trouble ahead if you think life is all fun and games."*

So, the "woe" here is to be read as "warning." Like the robot from the old show Lost in Space: "Danger, warning...!"

Simply put, those in deep need, who recognize their need, are blessed because God is going to pay close attention to them and provide for them—because their hearts are open to God. Those who are self-satisfied are on the wrong road; they're headed in a bad direction—and if they continue on that road, they'll find themselves in a deserted place, to use Jeremiah's image—just dust and tumbleweeds. And they'll end up there because their choices will isolate

them, from God and from others. And they'll become isolated even from their own true selves. Because their desires have caused them to walk down a path of seeking fulfillment in unhelpful things.

So, in that sense, this is a pastoral teaching. It's declarative and prophetic for sure. But it's also pastoral because Jesus doesn't want anyone to go down a self-destructive road; he wants people to follow him on a life-giving road—a way (The Way) that produces flourishing, for themselves and for others. Like the prophets—even when they use salty language to get peoples' attention the goal is to invite people into a better way. Into God's way, a way that reflects God's heart of care and compassion and a just world.

Which brings us to the other important aspect of our account this morning...: this is another, further call to discipleship, a further call to following Jesus in the Way. Last week we saw the winsome call to Peter and the other fishermen, which no doubt inspired others to begin following him in earnest. Now Jesus is explaining what that call means and where it will lead them, and to whom. To people who are hungry—literally and figuratively—to people who know they need God, for whom life feels more like loss rather than gain, who have been pressed to the margins of society and of an adequate existence. You can almost hear Jesus saying, again, to the crowd: “Come, follow me”.

It's significant that Jesus comes down from the mountain to say what he says. I love Luke's description of Jesus being "on a level place." Eye to eye, one of the people, feet firmly on the ground. There is a humility here on Jesus' part, and a path of downward mobility that he takes. In fact, Luke tells us that Jesus "looked up" at his followers to say all of this. Jesus has actually lowered himself, as a symbolic way of being a person of the earth, and especially as one who relates to the lowly.

Jesus is fulfilling that passage that is read every Advent, from Isaiah 40: "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low." It's the prophet's imaginative way of saying, everyone is on level ground at the savior's coming. And *he* will be on level ground with the people, as one among them. So, this is the Great Reversal, it's the Upside-Down Kingdom, *and...* this is also the Great Levelling.

In God's eyes, everyone is on level ground, and is to be treated equally.

Jesus' intent was not to simply "help" the poor (from above, reaching down), but to be in relationship with those in need, to be in community with those on the margins. To identify with them, walk with them. Jesus' work was not transactional, but transformational, and relational. Jesus didn't come to give

handouts, but to create a better world for everyone. And this is what he calls his followers to do, with him. *That's* the invitation.

There is an old movie I came across recently and randomly, titled *Whistle Down the Wind*, starring the young Hayley Mills. At the beginning of the movie, she and two friends, while hiding kittens from their dad in a country barn, stumble across a vagrant sleeping in the straw. Hayley Mills' character asks him, "Who are you?!" The vagrant abruptly awakes and, seeing the children, mutters, "Jesus Christ!"

And what he meant to be an expletive, the children took as truth. They believed the man to be Jesus Christ. For the rest of the movie, they treated the homeless man with awe, respect, and love. They brought him food and blankets, sat and talked with him, and told him about their lives. In time, their tenderness transformed him, an escaped convict who had never before known such kindness and generosity.

A cool backstory to this film is that Hayley Mills' mother wrote the story and intended it as kind of an allegory of what might happen if everyone took to heart Jesus' words about the poor and downtrodden, when he said in another place: "As much as you've done it to the least of these, you've done it unto me."

Mother Teresa once explained to an American visitor who couldn't comprehend her fierce commitment to the least of these in Calcutta, "We are a contemplative order; first we meditate on Jesus, and then we go and look for him in disguise."

There's something to try! Contemplate Jesus, and then go out into the world to look for him in others. Especially "the least of these."

In a time when the disparity between rich and poor in our country is growing, and the gap widening, perhaps we can contemplate how we can be people of the Great Levelling—to see as blessed those Jesus pronounced as blessed, and do our part, in small and simple ways, to lift them up and walk on level ground, creating a "harmony of peace" that the song we're about to sing speaks of.

Today We All Are Called to be Disciples