

Epiphany +6 Luke 6: 17-28 2/13/22 Agnus Dei Lutheran Church

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace. . .

It is good to be with you today, to share this beautiful space, to hear your voices singing and praying. . . to join my voice to yours. Over the past two years I have been reminded what a precious gift it is to gather for worship. I may have taken it for granted before the pandemic, but that's no longer true. If you are joining us online today, we are thankful for your participation, as well, and long for the day when it is safe for us to gather in one space, in the flesh, for worship.

Our gospel story takes place at a gathering of people. The people weren't sitting politely in pews, like you are. They were not singing the liturgy and observing proper pandemic protocols. The gospel writer describes a large, somewhat unwieldy scene of clamoring people. . . all sorts of people from all sorts of places—Jews and gentiles, urbanites and rural folks, some of sound mind and body, others suffering from a various ailments. It was an unlikely assembly and probably quite uncomfortable for those accustomed to following purity codes as part of their religious practice. The text is clear that this was a gathering of so-called “clean” and “unclean” people, a crowd that included the devoted, the curious and the suspicious. I suspect that no one was wearing a mask. To be honest this is the type of gathering I try to avoid.

But Jesus isn't like me. He often found himself surrounded by crowds of people, all kinds of people. Word was out about him, that he offered good news to the poor, freedom to captives, sight to the blind, Jubilee for all. Infused with divine power, he used this power to heal people. . . to cure them and restore them to their relationships and their communities. Word had spread and people responded, in droves. I imagine it was a joyful, chaotic, energy-filled scene.

It was also a teachable moment for the disciples. They were brand new to discipleship, having just dropped their nets or closed their books or tax ledgers to answer Christ's call. They left behind what was familiar and perhaps comfortable, and now they didn't know where their next meal would come from or where they would lay their head. Friends and family members wondered if they had lost their minds, taking up with this itinerant preacher, risking their safety and their reputation, to join his “kingdom of God” road show. In the midst of the hub-bub he turned to his disciples and said: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when*

*people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on my account. Rejoice and leap for joy, for your reward will be great.*

Jesus did not see the crowd around him as a gathering of deplorables. He saw them as the blessed ones, the fortunate ones. You are lucky to be in this place at this moment with these people, Jesus told his disciples, because HERE is where the kingdom of God is breaking in. Here is where lives are being transformed by divine mercy and grace.

To underscore this unusual perspective, Jesus continued: Woe to you who rarely find yourselves in these places with these people. Woe to the rich, the protected and comfortable and secure, those with plenty to eat whose lives are filled with pleasure. Woe to you who would never risk losing the admiration of others, who are too insulated or privileged to stand on level ground with the sick and the suffering, the unclean, the cast-offs. Woe to them. For you will miss this moment. You will not get to witness the breathtaking impact of God's reign in Christ.

Jesus drew a bright line in his preaching and teaching. I often hear him described as someone with no boundaries, but I don't understand Jesus that way. It's just that his boundaries are in different places than mine. I'm tempted to soften Jesus' words a bit, to buff the edges so they aren't quite so sharp. But this would not be faithful to Luke's story. This is the gospel, after all, that begins with a teenage girl singing about casting down the mighty and exalting the lowly. . . about the hungry being filled and the rich being sent away empty. The inbreaking of God's reign brings with it a great reversal and how you experience this reversal depends on your location.

I know where I am located. I am a white, middle-class, well-educated, able bodied, cis-gendered person. I know my own desire for security and comfort. I like having enough resource and privilege to choose who I want in my life and who I do not. I don't enjoy rocking the boat. I like it when people are pleased with me, when I earn their respect rather than their ridicule. As a Christian in this time and place, I have never been in danger because of my faith. I am part of a dominant culture that shapes society to fit my beliefs, my perspective, my traditions. Being identified as a Christian costs me very little. I have to risk very little.

But being a disciple? Answering the call to FOLLOW Jesus? This is more risky. I have so much to lose. Jesus calls me to lay down my idols—wealth, power, status, comfort, security. "That to which your heart clings is your God", Luther wrote. I have so many gods. Jesus calls me from them, and leads me to the margins of life where blessed people are standing with open hands, dependent on God's lovingkindness. In order for me to be

healed, he calls me to stand in solidarity with society's forgotten, with those who, unlike me, are the most vulnerable. Jesus calls me to stand with them and says "Behold"—the kingdom of God belongs to the empty-handed. . . to those who trust God's mercy more than their own abilities. . . who live each day, not by their own accomplishment, but by the grace of God.

We who are full have so much to learn from those who are not. For it is when we come to Christ empty-handed that the power of his promise becomes real. The same Savior who was healing people in the desert is our Savior. He is the one who heals us of our disease and frees us from the unclean spirits that hold us captive. Joined to him in baptism, the steady flow of divine mercy has the power to cleanse and heal and shape us. As water can sculpt even the hardest of stones, the grace of God poured out for us in Christ can shape us into people of bold faith, bold hope and bold love, people of courage rather than comfort. . . blessed people who find their place in the great, unwieldy, generous, diverse, jubilant reign of God. Thanks be to God. Amen