

Quinquagesima 14/02/10 Luke 5: 17-26

In our gospel today, we hear what is called the Sermon on the Mount as recorded by Luke. It is also recorded in similar form by Matthew. Some think that it is one long sermon. The majority, however, understand it to be a compilation of many teachings of Jesus.

Even though there are differences between the two gospel recordings, one thing is sure — Jesus' words were revolutionary. They exploded like bombshells in an already charged atmosphere, upsetting the accepted standards taught by the religious leaders of that time, exposing fake piety by focusing on true humility.

Jesus' popularity was rising. His teachings had been confirmed with miracles such as healings and deliverance from demons. When people heard Jesus was in the area, they flocked to see him. So it was in our gospel story that an enormous crowd turned out to hear him. What Jesus laid out for them that day were the traits he looked for in his followers. The Beatitudes, as they are called, explain how to be "blessed." They may sound like contradictions, but God's way of life contradicts the world's. Indeed, we will not be blessed by following the world's standards, but by living according to kingdom's standards. "I'm so blessed to have a comfortable house, food on the table, family and friends. They bring me great happiness," we often hear. Yes, it's nice to have all these things, but blessed means more than happiness. What about those who don't have them? Are they being punished? In the Beatitudes, those Jesus calls blessed don't seem to be. The Beatitudes don't promise us laughter, pleasure, or prosperity. When Jesus used the word "blessed" he meant experiencing hope and joy outside of our circumstances. We find hope and joy, the deepest form of happiness, by following Jesus no matter what the cost.

The Beatitudes should be looked at as a whole because they challenge the way we live out our faith on a daily basis. They contrast kingdom values with worldly values. For instance, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20) clashes with the worldly value of pride and personal independence.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled" (Luke 6:21a) clashes with pursuing personal needs. These two beatitudes can stand alone, but they are also connected to one and other. Those who only look to their own needs, overlook those who have needs. Their material possessions and financial security cause them to think they have no need — they lack nothing — and so they have no need for God. They seem to be "rich" in the sight of the world, but in reality they are extremely "poor" and do not even recognize it.

The parable of the rich fool exemplifies this.

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' " But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." — Luke 12:16-21

In accumulating his wealth, this man probably took risks and felt rewarded because of his efforts. However, he had taken an eternal risk that was to be costly: "But God said to him, 'Foolish man! Tonight your life will be taken from you. So who will get those things you have prepared for yourself?' " (Luke 12:20).

The poor are receptive to the good news found in salvation. The rich are deaf — closed — and go to ruin because they were the ones who made it. God was never in their picture. The rich

man used his wealth to enrich only himself. He was proud of his business sense and didn't depend on any other person — especially not God. His power and wealth were of his own making. He looked to his wealth for blessing, never to God. “Blessed are the poor,” Jesus says. Jesus did not exalt poverty, but made it clear that those who are poor would ultimately be blessed because they could count on Jesus. They know that their hope and trust can't come from the world, so they look to God for help. When we look to God for help, we will be blessed. Whether rich or poor, we are to rely only on God. When wealth, power, prestige, and position reflect our own self-importance, we are lost. When we take what we have and use it for others, we find true blessing.

Using our possessions as agents of God's grace, we are set free to help others experience Christ's love. “Blessed are you who are poor” might be reworded as “Blessed are those who realize that they can't depend on the things of this world for happiness and put their trust in God.”

The rich fool endangered his life because of his focus on money, which gave him a sense of false security. He sought a firm foothold, not in God where it can be found, but in his wealth where it cannot be found. It is easier for us to enjoy our wealth and ignore the things that are eternal. It is precisely when we think we have it all that death knocks at our door, and our wealth becomes meaningless.

Many view people in economically deprived countries as “poor” (lacking money) but “rich in the spirit” (having great faith).

Does this mean we should not use our resources to help them because it might take away their so-named richness, which has been caused by being poor? This makes no sense at all. Face it. We have the resources to end poverty, to end world hunger. Instead, we hoard what we have instead of using it to bless others.

The poor have nothing but God on whom to depend. They realize they have nothing of their own to give to God and, therefore, must depend on his mercy. When we see our own poverty, we begin to glimpse what it means to be happy, truly blessed. Finally, we have placed our trust in the only place that we are sure of — Jesus Christ. One of the greats of hymnody “rock of Ages puts its well:

Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.

Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace;

foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Saviour, or I die.¹