

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany Luke 6:17-26

Lutheran Service Book Lectionary Series C

At the point where today's Gospel appears in Luke 6, the lines have just been drawn for events to take a new turn. On the one hand, another Sabbath healing has finally provoked those opposing Jesus to where they begin discussing (as Luke phrases it) *what they might do with him*.

Simultaneously, our Lord has just withdrawn to a mountain side for prayer, and when his disciples come to him he appoints the Twelve Apostles. So, as his enemies begin plotting his end, Christ looks to a future that is only just beginning.

What is at stake between these two actions? The salvation of mankind. Thus Christ descends to the plain, and Luke opens today's narrative by describing the distances and directions from which men and women have come to Christ. They have trekked to the hill country of Galilee from as far south as Jerusalem, and from as far north as the Phoenician coast.

What the author of our text also makes quite clear is this: While it is paralyzed legs and diseased lungs, infected ears and fevered bodies that have compelled the crowds to come to Christ, when Christ starts speaking his message compels them to stay. They suddenly realize that this man Jesus offers far more than an emergency clinic; he is offering to restore people to true life with God, to wholeness of soul and body.

What may shock us is how he begins. Notice in the text how, as Jesus speaks, his eyes are focused not on the general throng but on his disciples. Then he proceeds to address them in terms of what they either have lost or could lose: Discipleship may bring loss of income, to the point of facing days of hunger. Discipleship may bring sorrow, few days on which you find much to laugh about. It may win you hatred, cause your family to disown you, your congregation to expel you. But of all these possible conditions he keeps declaring to his disciples:

Blessed are you.

And for one reason: Your joy will be great when there dawns upon this world the Day of the Son of Man. Eternal life in God's presence – a life of knowing his peace in this world,

and of being freed from all troubles in the world to come – this alone is the Good Life, the life worth living, and the life worth dying for.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, to have food or friends is not evil; to be spoken well of does not disqualify you from heaven. Conversely, no one becomes justified in God's eyes by virtue of their being slandered, shunned, or deprived of wealth. Christ speaks in the way he does, rather, to force us to ask ourselves: What do I truly value as that which defines my life?

The woes that he speaks, therefore, speak to the temptation that comes with every earthly blessing. Who of us could begin to count the number of church-goers who only maintain the outer habits of piety so long as their notion of discipleship is compatible with the other goods they insist on having? This is why God choosing to deprive you of something you cherish can be an act of mercy – he forces you to take stock of your life and to clear your mind as to what is or is not your true treasure.

We are now twelve Sundays into the current Church Year, which as you probably remember is another year with Saint Luke. Long before this year is over, you and I will be reminded by the year's Gospel selections just how emphatic Christ is about the alluring power of material comfort. Even in this fallen world, God's earthly gifts to us are often so good that in our hearts the gifts replace the giver. What makes our situation especially dangerous is that we often become aware of this only when forced to choose.

How can you tell when something you enjoy has become your god? Begin thinking about it with this axiom: No one ever sacrifices their gods. Instead, by definition my god is that to which I sacrifice other things. No one ever ignores or neglects that which they truly love; your true love is that for whose sake you neglect other obligations. A false God of mine may be peculiar to me, whereas yours may be something quite different. Certain idols are household gods – the worship of them marks the members of an entire family. There can be congregational idols.

Other false gods are much more public, so that the seduction is one that you share with countless others in this time and place. In our present American culture we have elevated certain pursuits or achievements to divine heights; we amplify their importance far beyond their actual value.

In offering assurance to his disciples, Jesus speaks of the prophets. Overall, the real importance of the Old Testament prophets only became apparent in the days of rich and mighty kings. Study sometime the words of the prophets in terms of when they served, and you find that they often spoke their most scathing oracles when Israel seemed to be most prosperous and secure. And there were always plenty of priests and false prophets on hand to assure everyone that, since wealth and safety were gifts from the Lord, obviously nothing was wrong.

These were prophets like the young man from Anathoth, one tiny part of whose words we heard a few minutes ago – Jeremiah. Over against the prophets who were always well paid were those men – and some women – whom God raised up to point out what should have been obvious. In her enjoyment of the Promised Land and all that it could offer, Israel had obviously forgotten who she was – and why she was. In the name of growing larger and more glorious in the world’s eyes, she had become deaf to God’s Word and her own sacred mission.

Whether it was the luxurious lifestyle of the nobles, built on depriving their fellow Israelites of justice or land; or the godlessness of Israel’s kings, who often led the people they ruled into rampant idolatry and ruthless behavior... often the true prophets of Yahweh stood alone to condemn. And often they paid for it.

Several times in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that he is not ashamed to be counted among those who died before him for speaking God’s truth. Far more than a prophet he certainly is, and when he says, “Follow me,” he speaks as the Servant of the Lord who will die unjustly for the sins of the world, and three days later break the curse of death itself and bring immortality to light for all who believe in him. Nevertheless, as the righteous Son of God he is ready to suffer hatred and humiliation like the prophets who foretold him.

This is why he must invite people to follow him, as he does in today’s Gospel, by underscoring how arduous and sorrowful the road of discipleship can become. But only he can promise the eternal joy, the complete satisfaction, of life in the Kingdom. Nothing you can buy for dinner, no house or furniture for that house, neither any car or any place to which you can travel, gives that which is truly life. Indeed, in following our Lord many

of his servants have discovered what it really means to be alive to God only when they lost something they never dreamed they could live without.

So, in the name of Christ we pray for daily bread in all its forms – let's hear one again that long list from the Catechism:

food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors.

But then remember this: The degree to which a person gets to enjoy those blessings is not what makes their life BLESSED. Only the promise that comes to us in the Good News of the Son of God does that. ☩