

February 17, 2019 • 6th Sunday after Epiphany

“Plain Words on the Plain”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 6:17-26

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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at 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 who weep now, for you will laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 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. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. “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. “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

I want to wish you all a belated Happy Valentine’s Day. Our teachers put up a cute sign on our Sunday School bulletin board that says: “You’re always God’s valentine!” The kids love it, and I think all the adults do, too.

Did you ever wonder where Valentine’s Day comes from? Well, there are a number of traditions around this. One is that on February 14, the day after St. Valentine died, birds began to sing, heralding the beginning of Spring and the bird mating season. Hence the day became known as the perfect day to choose a sweetheart. And a day for love was born!

The poet, Kwame Alexander, likes to create poetry by “crowd-sourcing” a theme. He’ll toss it out, gather up all the responses he gets, and weave them into a poem. For Valentine’s Day this year, he did that working with the theme: “what is love?” He sent that out to teachers of some 2000 children and youth to get responses.

As we know, kids are usually straight-forward and plain-spoken. They’re direct and call it like it is. Here are some excerpts from the poem Alexander created called “What is love...?”

*Love is happiness
tiny puppy kisses
Sister hugs
the brother she misses*

*Love is unexplainable,
unexpected
something you can’t find
but it somehow finds you
the thing that makes you want to stay...*

*Love is when your dog doesn’t bite you
Love is raindrops caring for the plants.
Helping them to grow to great big trees.
Making a loving home for the creatures of the forest.
Dying only to give fertile soil for the plants to come.*

*Love is patient
Love is scary
Love is learning
Love is confusing*

Love is accepting everyone no matter their beliefs. No matter what they look like.

*Difficult, but not insurmountable;
Love is a mountain;
A journey not undertaken lightly;
A reward not gained easily.*

Now in that spirit of plain-spoken talk, let’s circle back around to the question of just who was St. Valentine, anyway? In Christian lore, it seems that there were actually two by that name, both martyred for their faith quite early on, around the year 269. One may have been the bishop of Terni, Italy. In those days of the persecution of the Christians, they met secretly and hid their faith to protect their lives. How different from our modern Christianity of very visible tall steeple churches!

But bishops, because of their distinctive clothing, were unable to hide their faith and were often the first Christians in their community to be tortured and killed by the Roman armies. Often a bishop died in the hope that the others in his community would not be found.

The other Valentine, martyred that year, was a priest and a physician in Rome. A legend says that he sent letters of love and encouragement to other members of his community—congregation, we would say—who lived in fear of persecution and death. And so perhaps the custom of sending cards and letters to loved ones grew out of his example.

These plain-spoken stories of the Saints Valentine form a chapter in our Christian heritage we forget or just don’t know. It was a time in our history when being a Christian and giving allegiance to Christ set one over against the government and put one’s very life at risk. We who live in a nation where the role of government is to protect one’s religious freedom may find it hard to grasp that at the root of

our Christian faith is this heritage of allegiance to an ethic, a way of life, a moral structure that may put us at odds with the status quo. This is true for Christians in parts of our world even today.

Today's Gospel reading is Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus teaching from a level place or "the Plain." We might actually prefer the version found in Matthew's Gospel. It's been softened up. Matthew speaks of the "poor in spirit." Luke says plainly: "Blessed are the poor." And so forth. Plain words spoken from the plain where he was teaching that day. And the challenge to us is how to live it, we who would be followers of Jesus Christ.

Let me read it again for us again now, this time as translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*. Peterson makes it even more plain.

"You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding. You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal. You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning. Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don't like it, I do...and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get. And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it. There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular."

As we move through these weeks of the Epiphany season, exploring who Jesus really is and all that he means for our lives, we see over and over again how he is introducing us not only to a new way of thinking and seeing the world around us. He wants us to understand and jump into a whole new way of living. It is a way that moves beyond the standards of this world, focused on how much we have or on our social standing. It is in the every-day world of living, the give and take of our daily lives, the craziness of busy schedules and family activities, work and obligations, in leisure and recreation—in the midst of all the choices we make, the choices we don't have time to make, the promises we make and the promises we keep—it is here that faith works itself out, as blessing when we are faithful, as brokenness when we are not.

Remember how Jesus proclaimed, as his public ministry was just beginning: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The passage we hear today has been called his second inaugural sermon and we can easily see that themes are the same. Especially for Luke, the way of blessedness for Christians does not stop with our own individual spiritual growth and well-being, our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It extends far into the social and political realm, encompassing compassion and justice for all of God's children.

This does not mean that there is any one form of style of politics that fits us all. It does not mean that we all here are or should be of one political stripe. We are diverse and that diversity is created by God. It's nothing to be afraid of, but rather to be embraced and cherished, drawing us closer into the glorious diversity of God's wondrous creation.

The way of Jesus is the way of blessedness. It's certainly not the "good life" presented to us relentlessly through advertising and popular culture. The way of blessedness is a way of emptying ourselves in order to make room in our hearts for the presence of God. It's a way of not exalting ourselves by the measure of this world, in order to experience a deeper measure of value in Christ-like living.

It's a way of not valuing ourselves by wealth, success, beauty, prestige, but rather by the measure of our love of family, friends, community and God. It's a way of spending our resources—our time, our money, our talents—in the service of others. The way of blessedness is the way of seeing Christ in those we might at first think are "below" us—the poor, the homeless, all those who this society too easily casts aside. The way of blessedness is about seeking always what is true, not necessarily what is popular or socially approved. The way of blessedness can be very costly. To some of our Christian ancestors, it meant the cost of their lives. For us, it can mean the cost of stepping outside the "good life" long enough to experience life through the dying and rising of Christ Jesus.

Now as always in the history of the church, the authentic Christian life will mix us up in the messiness of this world, in the most difficult and seemingly intractable dilemmas of our society—worth some moments of reflection on this President's Day weekend. Following Christ means that as Christians our spiritual health depends on our caring about the "least of our brothers and sisters." That we should not rest easy while so many are homeless, unemployed, sick and poor. It means making choices, and perhaps a resetting of priorities. It may mean taking a risk and trying something new. It always means depending on God, looking to Christ Jesus, the One who speaks plain words of love to show us the Way that leads to abundant life for one and all.

Together, let us seek to walk the Way of blessedness, always looking to Christ, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith.

Amen

Notes:

Eugene Peterson, *The Message*. Navpress, 1995.

"Rejoice in God's Saints." UMH #708. Words by Fred Pratt Green. (edited)

Diane Bergant, *Preaching the New Lectionary Year C*. The Liturgical Press, 2000.

Mary Ellen Hynes. *Companion to the Calendar*. The Liturgical Press, 1993.

Kwame Alexander. Excerpts from "Love Is." NPR Morning Edition. Feb. 14, 2019.

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