"How Can the Poor and Hungry Possibly Be Blessed and Who Are They?"
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Balicki
6th Sunday after Epiphany
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St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

We live in a culture of entertainment where every drama, mystery or comedy that's on a tv channel or one of the streaming services has to have a season, an episode and a title. If we translate this to our excursion through the beginning of St. Luke's gospel, we could look back three weeks to Jan. 26 and call it "Jesus' Hometown Debut", last weekend it would have been "Recruiting Helpers or Indeed he did" and today, let's call it "Training Manual". So why that title?

We left last week with three disciples and start this week with twelve apostles coming off a mountain. "Hey who are these guys?" Well Luke tells us Jesus had them up in the hill-country and called nine others to join the three he had. Now in the modern workplace recruitment and hiring always gets followed by training – some of it generic like on organizational policies but some more specific like what is this job all about. Those twelve guys must have wondered, "Hey we're having a great time hanging with you but what are we supposed to be doing?" Luke says this training happened on a "level place" which labels this rather long teaching the Sermon on the Plain, the lesser known counterpart of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount.

Many romantic pictures and movies have shown this scene of Jesus teaching the vast multitudes. Did it really happen this way? I hate to break your bubble but probably not. Matthew has Jesus on a mountain, Luke on a plain. You could have at least thought they would get that one right. And they can't agree either on what he said, even these most well-known beginning lines: Matthew has eight beatitudes and Luke has four blessings followed by four woes. So what's going on here?

Now I'll try not to get too wonky but scholars believe there was a source called the Q gospel that's never been found but existed in the early years after Jesus because both Matthew and Luke must have used it to copy from, though not verbatim which is why they vary. And if this theory is true, then these are some of the first sayings of Jesus recorded, which means they are very close in time to when Jesus actually said them. And they got compiled because they were easy to remember - those pithy, pointed sayings that stick in our heads far easier than a long speech or sermon. These same sayings were used as a catechism as the Church began to take on new members, "This is the Way of Jesus". Do this – act like this.

Which makes this text not only beloved but really important. But enough with the backstory already, what did he say? Jesus turns their world, meaning the common cultural values of his day as well as our own, upside-down. The first sentence is "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God". Notice how different that is from Matthew's first beatitude when he says "Blessed are the poor in spirit". Now we've all been poor in spirit because a loved one has passed away, a child has moved from home, a relationship ended, we've gone off the deep end by overusing some substance, those are serious enough but they aren't poverty. In fact if we look at the Greek word used here, it's *ptochoi* for which a closer English translation might be "destitute". Now maybe some have been a little poor - low cash flow, out of work, borrowing from a relative when we didn't want to. And I don't want to assume that no one here has been really poor in their lives. But do you want to see destitute? Look at the photo on the bulletin. You've probably seen it before; it's one of the most famous photos of the 20th century.

Dorothea Lange was hired under a New Deal program in the 1930's to document the plight of migrant farm workers who lived in squalor in California labor camps. She was returning home from an assignment in March of 1936 when she came across a sign near Nipomo, California, that would change her life: PEA-PICKERS CAMP. Although she had all the pictures she needed, something compelled her to stop:
"I was following instinct, not reason; I drove into that wet and soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon. I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction." I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.

I have regrets showing a photo like this from the Dust Bowl as if poverty was a relic of the past. On a count done in 2023 here in Maine, 4,258 people were currently experiencing homelessness, up from 1,200 ten years earlier. A year ago the count was 770,000 in the US, that's over half the population of the state of Maine. But of those who do have shelter, 10.4% of the state of Maine live under the poverty level, every one in nine people.

So what's the point you might be wondering? What am I to do with this reading? Wallow in guilt? Romanticize poverty? Avoid happiness? No. The very fact that Jesus prefaces this hard teaching by alleviating suffering in every way possible suggests that he does not highlight misery for its own sake. Pain in and of itself is neither holy nor redemptive in the

Christian story nor is Jesus asserting that all the destitute are good people and all the aristocrats are evil. As scripture scholar John Dominic Crossan puts it,

"God is for the destitute and powerless not because they are individually good but because their situation is structurally unjust. God is against the rich and powerful not because they are individually evil but because they are systemically evil. The Jewish God has no preferential option for the poor; rather the Jewish God has a preferential option for justice."

It's like Brazilian bishop Dom Helder Camara who said, "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist".

And what about these woes? Woe to you who are rich.

Perhaps no part of Jesus' message has been rejected so completely by U.S. Christianity as the dire warning against wealth and how it leads us astray. Instead, we admire, envy and aspire to become the rich.

Woe to us for the many ways in which we worship the rich.

We elect a leader who says that you must be rich to be great, and only the wealthy know how to save us from the economic inequalities and injustices that they've created.

We become disciples of prosperity preachers who live in mansions and promise that divine wealth will trickle down to us if we purchase their books and buy them private jets. It's clear to me that the prosperity gospel so popular today in the most popular churches in the US is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But what do we do with all this? As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, Jesus' sermon "is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone.".

Or as Debie Thomas describes it, *This is a teaching so costly, so soul-rattling, so unpalatable, that most of us will do anything to domesticate or ignore it. Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Why? Because you have everything to look forward to. Because the Kingdom of God is yours. Because God is the God of those who have nothing but him.*

Lord, help me to hear what this is saying. Help me not to squirm away. Help me somehow to sit with woe, and learn the meaning of blessing.