

Sermon February 16, 2025

We think of Jesus' greatest teachings up on a mountaintop, but Luke's version of this event happens on a Plain. Picture a vast, flat land, filled with crowds seeking a healing touch. After healing the crowds that surround him, Jesus turns to his disciples and begins to teach them. He gives out blessings, as he does in Matthew 5, but in Luke's account there are also woes. For those who have nothing now, theirs is the kingdom of heaven, but to those who have enough now, it will be taken from them. What appears to be good news is for those in need, but to those who think they are on the inside, that what they've received now are blessings—they are the ones who will be on the outside, they will receive woe.

*Invite the congregation to hold up their hands to bless each other each time they hear the word "blessed." Encourage them to face a different direction with each "blessed" in order to focus their blessing hands on as many different people as possible.*

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 on 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.

### Broken Strength

Bearing with him the same message that he preached in Nazareth and covered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus takes his show on the road. Surrounded by the poor, sick and needy people who have heard his message of hope and they are desperate for his healing touch and sacred presence.

His new disciples must have been overwhelmed by so much grief and pain and need... so Jesus makes it a teachable moment:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," he begins. And the list of blessings goes on: Blessed are the hungry... those who weep... those who are hated... those who are reviled by their community.

Now this isn't the "bless your heart" kind of blessing. Anyone who has been at the receiving end of a good old fashioned "bless your heart," knows it's not designed to make you feel better or to lift you up.

Jesus' blessings are filled with hope and promise. This is the continuation of his sermon at his hometown. He looks at these people who have come to him in desperation and he tells them: "God sees you... God hears your cries... God is with you every step of the way in this thing we call life... God knows you... You are not alone."

And then he goes a step further. He piles a list of woes on those who do not suffer. Horrible things will happen to if you are rich, happy, have good standing in society.

You can just see the rich and powerful religious and political leaders heads explode. It kind of makes you wonder how he managed to make it as long as he did, because his message threatened those who had the most to lose.

And, if we're honest, when we hear those list of woes, some of us probably feel uncomfortable. We want more love and less justice, Pastor Katie! Where's the love?

It's right in front of your eyes!

From the beginning of creation, God wanted one thing from humanity – to be in relationship with us. That's the sacred story that we follow throughout scripture... and throughout our lives. God reaches out through rainbows and laws, burning bushes and dramatic rescues... but the people keep turning away. We forget what God has done for us. We hold on to what we have. We take credit for our blessings and blame others for their lack of blessings. We say they are unworthy and don't belong. We push God's teachings farther and farther away... So, God sends prophets, over and over again. Sometimes the people listen, but usually we don't listen until it's too late. And each time, as God's beloved people drift farther into the wilderness or Exile, God cries.

God wants to be in relationship with us.

So, what does God do? The most amazing thing of all. Sometimes, we forget how amazing it is. God chose to come here, to the world that God created, and live as one of us... as one of God's beloved children. "If they won't listen to my prophet's, maybe they will listen to me."

Today, we hear God's prophetic voice through Jesus. God, reaching out to those who have been pushed aside and marginalized. God reaching out to those who mistakenly think they already have everything that they need.

God in Jesus saying to each and everyone of us, no matter where we are in life's journey: "God sees you... God hears your cries... God is with you every step of the way in this thing we call life... God knows you... You are worthy and... You are not alone."

Jesus' words today are an invitation for change. Love without justice is worthless and creates a world filled with woe.

God hungers for a world filled with blessings and empty of woes, but that is up to us. The ways of justice are restorative. Jesus condemns them not because of what they have... but because they are not good stewards of what they have. We are expected to share what we have with others – not a little bit here and a little bit there, but to share extravagantly, just as God shared God's life extravagantly through Jesus.

Louise Penny is a mystery writer but she is so much more. Her books paint pictures of what life is like and how we connect with one another, sometimes in the darkest moments of our lives. In one of her books, a young man remembers a moment when he broke something as a child. As his mother repairs it, she smiles and says: "*Things are strongest where they are broken.*" That line becomes a mantra for many of the characters as they move forward in a broken world. It sounds counter-intuitive but I kept going back to that phrase: *Things are strongest where they are broken.*

Beloved, this is the story of our faith. God finds strength in our most broken places – in the hungry and the poor, in the sick and the weak, in those that Jesus later will call, "The least of these, my brothers and sisters." Faith is found in seemingly weak places too – tiny mustard seeds that could easily be gobbled up by a bird... mustard seeds that grow not into a tree, but a bush. An old woman desperately looking for that one lost coin, a shepherd leaving a strong flock to look for one, little, vulnerable, lost sheep. A homeless family finding shelter in a barn to give birth to God as a baby and that baby boy, showing us strength in the most broken place of all, nailed to a cross. Broken, bent, but stronger than ever.

Today, God calls us to look at our places of blessings and brokenness and find signs of Gods restorative strength, And then, once again, we will hear that eternal voice call out to us: "God sees you... God hears your cries... God is with you every step of the way in this thing we call life... God knows you... You are worthy... You are not alone." Amen

## Benediction

*Invite the congregation to raise their hands towards one another to bless each other into the coming week as the Benediction is given:*

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.  
May you be like trees planted by streams of water,  
which bear fruit at just the right time, and like them, may you prosper in all  
you do.  
May God bless you and give you peace.