

**Sermon: February 13, 2022 – Luke 6: 17-26**

**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Forty-plus years ago when I started preaching, I spoke in a lot of different communities, both in ongoing appointments and as a Sunday pinch-hit preacher, and as I recall, ten of the first twelve communities that I preached in were well under a thousand population. In many of those situations, the United Church of Canada was one of no more than three Churches in town: commonly there would be United, and Roman Catholic, and Lutheran or Anglican or Orthodox or perhaps an unaffiliated Evangelical Church, and in that setting you get used to speaking to people coming from a wide range of theological perspectives, life stages, and financial circumstances.

As we hear words today from the Sermon on the Plain, I imagine Jesus looking out at men, women and children, farmers and fisherfolk and tradespeople, young and old, who had come from a bunch of different agrarian areas and towns and villages surrounding the Sea of Galilee and seeking the right words so that each individual could feel Jesus was speaking directly to their life's circumstances. And especially when we think of this as a sermon at the beginning of his Ministry, these words would need to encourage some sort of action in the listener. They needed to speak the truth about the way things were, including God's own desire for an inversion of the power structures of the day, but they also needed to set a horizon line for people and communities to aspire to. Whether their lives were easy or challenging, none of the witnesses to these words could be left with a sense of being stuck or static or doomed.

We may be more familiar with Matthew's somewhat gentler version of this sermon (Matt. 5-7, known as the Sermon on the Mount) which has only blessings and uses the phrase "blessed are the poor in spirit" rather than "blessed are the poor", but in Luke's version, Jesus follows the list of blessings with a set of woes. This is most definitely not a "gently balanced" set of sayings designed to put no-one on edge. As liberation theologians have said for decades, God has a "preferential option for the poor" – a special affinity for and engagement with those who are targeted or made vulnerable by others, and these edgy words from Jesus express this. Taken broadly, he lifts up the downtrodden and their plight and challenges those who hold power, affirming the personhood of those who had been told that they do not matter, and diminishing the self-perception of those with advantage over others. And yet I also sense in his words, that he is doing groundwork for transformation, rather than just comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable (to borrow a phrase from Finley Peter Dunne).

To the poor and the excluded, the embattled and the traumatized, I hear Jesus promising a better day, here and beyond, while also giving them safe, supported space to do whatever work they needed to do in their hearts to get personally unstuck. To the wealthy and the privileged, I hear Jesus naming the injustices they are responsible for but to them as well, I sense there is space for change – although for this group, it is presented within an "or else" framework. In his Bible translation, "The Message", the late Eugene Peterson really captures this dual sense of big social transformation and the need for self-assessment and soul work in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. As you hear these words, I encourage you to hear things you likely already know in your heart: the places where you are being affirmed, the places where you are opened to hope, the places where you are being challenged to find a new way of being.

*"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... 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.”*

Written in 1993, does this interpretation ever stand up well in 2022. (That final bit sounded very much like warning us off social media and its emphasis on popularity over truth...!) Or perhaps better to say, do the concepts and preaching points of Jesus from two thousand years ago, ever hold up well in 2022. When things are dire, there is hope, real hope. When we feel isolated, confused, on the defensive, the Holy breaks down walls. When our goals are faulty, there are choppy seas ahead. And as we imagine a wide range of people from the Galilee, come to hear this young local speaker speak words of comfort and challenge, we may well get a glimpse of what we are called to do and who we are called to be in this place, at this time. With Christ's own heart we are named as beloved and claimed to be people of relentless peace and powerful love. With Christ's own compassion we are told to be honest with ourselves, to open ourselves to seek health and wholeness for ourselves and others, to know that we have safe space to repent, to recover, to be born anew. With Christ's own courage we have the injustices of our world named and are empowered to work for justice no matter where we see ourselves fitting into those structures.

Wherever you are, whatever your circumstances, however you fit or don't fit into a community, wherever you need to find hope and wherever you need support to make changes, may these words sharpen your perception of the world around you, and equip you for life in all its just and loving fullness. In Christ we pray, Amen.

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<https://youtu.be/CJ4mtCAL0yc>