

## Woe to You Who Are Rich: The Problem of Riches

February 17, 2019

### I

So there's this guy who walks into a bookstore to return a purchase. "It's a Bible," he says, handing it to the clerk at the cash register. "Was it a gift?" asks the clerk. "No," he says, "I bought it for myself, and I just made a mistake." "Didn't you like the translation?" "Oh no," the man says, "the translation's fine. I just made a mistake." The clerk says, "Well, I still need to write down a reason for the return." The guy says, "O.K., you can write this down: There's a lot in this book that's very tough to swallow."

-----

Which brings me to this morning's Gospel! "Woe to you who are rich ... you who are full now ... you who laugh now ... 'cause you've received your reward!"

-----

Well I think we never quite know what to do with these woes. They make you squirm, don't they? They sure do me! So I guess folks always do pretty much what they want with 'em. I mean, they always have: twist 'em around, make 'em say something else. But if you read Luke here – his version of Jesus' sermon, I mean Jesus was real direct here! And He must have shocked the socks off His listeners. Blessed are the mournful? The poor? The hungry? I mean, no one in his right mind is gonna vote for these marks of the good life.

But I guess Jesus didn't ask 'em ... or us ... to vote, did He? No, He just redefined the good life in four short lines. Gave us four pictures of kingdom folks, those we usually like to call pushovers, suckers ... losers. Jesus says these are the blessed ones, the chosen ones who'll see God face to face. So it turns out that life's losers are blessed in God's book!

-----

OK. See, I think we really don't know what to do with any of this business. Never have. But I think if you look carefully at the language here, I think you'll see that these blessings and woes are not exactly prescriptions – you know, like do this and you'll get that. No, they're really a kind-of description ... like this is who these people are now, and this is what the future holds for them.

-----

So I guess this is Jesus' news of the day, given as Gospel. And maybe the really good part of this Good News – depending on where you stand, I guess – the good part is that this future begins right now. 'Cause Jesus says right off, "The time of fulfillment is now." Like He says this is the truth! This is the way God's kingdom is. Even now. And blessed are you ... and woe ... woe ... to you ... depending on where you stand! That's ... Jesus' news!

-----

But there's other news, isn't there? And I don't know about you, but I get my news of the day by listening to NPR in the morning and then NBC and then PBS sometimes ... if I haven't gotten sick of the news of the day by then! And then I sit back and settle in – drinking my morning coffee or preparing dinner with one eye on the little screen in the corner of the kitchen ... while those chatty, ever-cheerful newscasters tell us the news of our day.

And in a way, I guess it's like taking stock, isn't it ... no matter how awful it is ... it's really a way of tuning in on the rest of the world ... checking out the larger sweep of things. And see, every evening the news is a little different ... a little different slant on things. But I think it always seems to boil down to a few themes across the days of our lives ... day after day, year after year.

I mean, there's always wars and rumors of wars ... always followed by huddled folks searching for peace ... or asylum ... some way out of the mess they find themselves in. And of course, the world's always hungry ... like those folks now in Venezuela – hunger being one of those other great recurring themes. And not just in the third world, folks ... but all over the world ... right here in Richmond, by the way! Houses without plumbing ... right here in our backyards ... folks like stray cats, roaming the streets, sleepin' in the Greyhound terminal ... till someone kicks 'em out ... with no place to go, no place that belongs to them, no place where they belong.

Well ... this is the news of our day, isn't it ... in one way or another involving the world's wretched. And every evening you and I settle back in our chairs and watch the parade across our flickering screens. And we cluck our tongues and say ... how sad. How bad! But also maybe ... ummm ... oh dear maybe somewhere deep inside lurks this unbidden thought: Losers.

And maybe ... somewhere in there another unbidden thought lurks: maybe ... maybe their misfortune's no mistake. Maybe it's just desserts in some way: you know, maybe in part it's their own darned fault. I mean, why didn't they vote with their feet and get out of Venezuela when the gettin' was good? I mean, who voted for that president anyway?

Maybe folks get what they deserve! Maybe somehow they've actually slipped from God's favor. Oh sure, we've been put on Earth to love our neighbors, but I mean ... changing their lot in life is basically up to them, isn't it? I mean, this is the American way ... the way of individual responsibility and initiative. Our American myth – anyone willing to work hard enough can win first prize. See, someone said Americans live under a kind of "paradise spell," where we always think that just out of our reach, just with the next home, next diet plan; just with the next credit card purchase, the next true love, just with the right beer or next shopping spree, why, our ship's gonna come in. Our prosperity will finally buy us bliss, buy us peace, buy us the perfectly good life!

Hey, anyone can do it!

## II

'Course, this isn't new, is it? In fact, if you look in the Gospel of Matthew, you'll find this: "For those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away." Why, the very first Psalm makes it perfectly clear that the Lord watches over the way of the righteous. But the way of the wicked will perish. All right, case closed! There you go!

In Jesus' time and in our time, we can link wealth with God's favor. So maybe mammon is not a bad thing at all. In fact, maybe it's a very good sign, a sure sign of God's favor. And those who obey God are blessed with material rewards ... and those who don't are condemned to poverty ... which works out pretty nicely on two counts. It not only allows the rich to enjoy their riches; it also allows them to stroll right past the beggars who sleep by their garbage cans without even a glance their way – just leaving well enough alone. I mean, let the poor pick themselves up and dust themselves off. Let 'em try harder to do what's right, and God just might smile on them too.

-----

Well, enough of that.

See, this is called the "health and wealth theology!" And you don't need me to tell you it's still alive and well today. And it looks to me like Jesus just couldn't stand it. See, I guess what He really hated ... what He really hated was the self-serving way of reading scripture. 'Cause there was plenty in the prophets, plenty of passages in the Hebrew Bible – Jesus' scripture – passages that went the other way. Passages like "those who oppress the poor, insult their Maker. But those who are kind to the needy honor God." Words like that. And there are plenty more if you look.

And passages like these make it very clear that – far from judging the poor – God identifies with 'em. So you could say that to walk past a beggar is to walk past God. And woe to you who do.

-----

Well so. Here we are. And I'll bet when you hear these woes, I bet you plummet right down into your own chasm of guilt. I know I do, even though that's not really the point here. See, what I think the point really is is this: I think the point of Luke's scene here ... and I guess the real point of Luke's whole Gospel story ... is to tell you and me the truth ... to tell you the news you really need to know in hopes it'll change your life. Otherwise, I think God could care less about your guilt. 'Cause the only thing guilt is really good for is to move you to change. If it doesn't do that, then it's a sorry substitute for new life. "I can't do what you're asking me, God, but I sure do feel bad about it. Will you settle for that?"

See, I think Jesus' blessings and woes here ... are not just for saving the world ... but for saving your very soul. 'Cause the real news of our days – what we're doing with our lives and "what our lives are doing to us" – the real news is the news of what you and I are becoming ... or failing to become as the case may be.

So I think it's essential to really look at how you and I live out our lives, and what we're becoming in the process.

### III

So here's my question: How do you do that? Well, maybe the best time to review the news of your day ... and mine ... is at night, when you crawl into bed and turn off the light ... waiting for sleep. And I'll bet at least sometimes the news of your own life ... the skirmishes, the wars within yourself and with those you love, the sometimes meanness and pinchiness of my life ... and yours ... this news flicks across the mind's screen at night, when it's dark, before you fall asleep. And maybe you also sometimes see those TV images of third world babies ... or Jackson Ward kids ... or Appalachian kids ... or Sudanese kids "with their swollen bellies and their legs and arms like little sticks, eyes vacant in their ancient faces."

And woe to you and woe to me, and may God have mercy on us, if we find no way to wipe their hunger from the face of the earth.

-----

See, this is the truth of our lives. And this – I think – is Jesus' real point here. So here's the point: When Jesus commanded us to love and feed and clothe our neighbor, it wasn't just for our neighbor's sake, not just for the poor's sake, but for our own sake as well. And you begin to see that the poor, the meek, the mournful are not just folks you can help, but folks who can help you: help you to become human, help you to become whole if you let them.

Well, finally, circling back to Jesus' sermon here, maybe He did enjoy shocking His money-loving listeners! But I don't think that's all He wanted. No, I think what He really wanted was to tell them deep truth – a truth they did not seem to know – what you and I still do not really seem to know – that we are all victims of our own way of life. When we turn a blind eye to the misery of some, by convincing ourselves that they really deserve it, when we defend our own good fortune as God's blessing, and fail to see how our lives are quilted together with all other lives, then we are the losers. Not because of what God will do to us, but because of what we have done to ourselves. And then woe ... to you ... and to me.

Well, I guess the best thing about Luke's story, and without a doubt the best thing about yours and mine, is that it's not over yet. Over for those in Jesus' day, oh yes! But it's not over for you or for me. All that remains to be seen is how I ... how you will finish it.

Amen.

---

References: *Luke* by Fred B. Craddock (Interpretation series); *Synthesis for Epiphany 6, Year C*.