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St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany/Year C  
February 17, 2019  
Text: Luke 6:17-26

“Blessed are YOU”

Today’s lectionary gives us a teaching that is familiar to most of us. The “Sermon on the Plain” begins the same way Luke’s Gospel began: by imagining everything being turned upside down. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son in their old age, the angel spoke of John as the one who would “turn of the people of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16). After Mary was visited by Gabriel and told that she would conceive the Savior of the world she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Mary greeted her echoing Hannah’s ancient words of praise that spoke of a world that was being turned upside down. “The Lord”, Mary sang in her Magnificat, “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has fill the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53). And in his inaugural sermon in his hometown synagogue, Jesus read from the scroll the words of Isaiah his mission statement which said; the poor would receive good news, captives would be released, the blind would receive their sight, and the oppressed would go free. If we remember, the townspeople were impressed at first but then they grew angry because this was not the world they were experiencing and that Jesus had dared to declare that God had other plans, plans that would include *all* people and not just the children of Israel. But here on the plain, it was a new day and a different crowd.

Jesus’ popularity had steadily increased over time. More and more people had heard of his teachings and of the miraculous deeds he was performing. How those possessed were freed from their demons and how the sick were healed and lepers were cured. The paralyzed walked. The multitude that followed him swelled in great number and included all manner of people who came from cities and towns far and near; the sick, the curious, the desperate, the destitute, and the undecided, those looking to witness a miracle as well as those waiting for him to trip himself up, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Luke says that after a night of prayer on top of a mountain, Jesus chose twelve to be his closest disciples. They all came down and stopped on a level place where the crowd could hear and be touched by Jesus. And one by one each

person experienced the healing power of Jesus by a look, the touch of his hand, a tug of his garments. He understood their pain, their suffering, their wants, their hopes, and none, none, were turned away. He took time to heal them all.

And then Jesus took a moment and looked directly into the eyes of his disciples and of the crowd and began to speak. He spoke not down to them but at their level, figuratively and literally. As theologian Renita Weems noted, “Jesus is speaking “intimately and compassionately to the crowd” and “identifies with the crowd by standing with them rather than above them”. We can think of it perhaps this way: Jesus, God Incarnate, came down from heaven to be with us, not above us, but as one of us. “Blessed are you...” he began. Not “Blessed are those” as in Matthew’s version of the beatitudes but “Blessed are YOU...” YOU are blessed.

What does it mean to be blessed?

I have a friend whom I will call “Ruth” and whenever I call or encounter Ruth and I ask her how she is doing she will always say, “I am blessed and highly favored.” Not a time goes by that she does not say those words. So what does it mean that one is blessed?

In Jesus’ time “to be blessed” meant that one had a full and perhaps a round belly, land, spouse, heirs, a servant or two (perhaps more), and good fortune. We are not that different in our thinking centuries later. Many people feel they are blessed (and rightly so) because they have or had a good job, 2. 5 kids, 2 cars in the garage, and can afford to eat out maybe 1 or 2 or more times a week. Wonderful! And if we are honest, by the world’s standards we Americans are doing GOOD! Better than good-GREAT! But we know that those things are not afforded by everyone. Not everyone is employed. Not everyone is a parent. Many people have no mode of transportation other than their feet. Some people don’t have two nickels to rub together and too many children go to bed hungry every night. Ruth has always driven a “hoopty”-a car that is barely worth more than its tank of gas. There are days she prays it will start and she is able to get where she needs to go. If the car breaks down it could be weeks before she can afford to get it fixed. That is partly because she has not held down a “good” paying and full time job in years. She is one who lives from that little check to little check. Ruth is content with living in an apartment that she can barely turn around in, and is fairly comfortable eating no more than one or two meals a day. She wears just about the same clothes every other day. “As long as they are clean,” she says, “I’m good.” Though you and I know that others are worse off, Ruth is someone who will speedily and gladly tell you, “I am blessed and highly favored.”

To be blessed, the kind of blessing that Jesus speaks of, has little to do with material things. To be blessed is to know that God sees you and hears you. To be blessed is know that whenever and wherever you go, God is with you. You are never alone. To be blessed is know that you are a Child of God and that you are uniquely and wonderfully made in God's image and likeness. That just as God watches over tiny sparrows, that the words of an old gospel hymn is at work:

*Why should I feel discouraged, Why should the shadows come,  
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heav'n and home;  
When Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is He:  
His eye is on the sparrow, And I know He watches me;  
His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me.  
I sing because I'm happy.  
I sing because I'm free.  
His eye is on the sparrow  
And I know he (God) watches me.*

This what Ruth knows. This is what I know. This is probably and hopefully what you know too. And this is what Jesus is saying to all of us today.

Jesus is blessing the real poor, the hungry, the bereaved, and the outcasts of the world. He is declaring God's favor to those the world seems to think are the least likely to be blessed. Jesus' words are words that speak of social, political and economic justice and this is a different set of beatitudes than found in what is called the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew's Gospel. In Luke's "Sermon on the Plain", Jesus is making it plain and he promises a world turned upside down and inside out. From the poor lifted up and the mighty toppled in Mary's song, to the captives set free in the words of Isaiah, to those who are hated and mocked, and cursed who will know joy. *All* these and *all* persons, at *all* times and *everywhere* are blessed. God notices and watches over ALL.

In the "Sermon on the Plain", Jesus also makes it clear that there are woes that mirror those blessings. Woes for the rich, for the full and comfortable, for those who laugh, for those who are well spoken of. He says you may be comfortable NOW but look out lest you forget where your blessings came from and forget to look out for the needs of others.

Should those who have feel guilty, shamed, or frowned upon? And this includes you and me. No. They and all of us are blessed. But again, look out because these things can cause separation from God and from neighbor.

As Kathryn Matthew writes in her reflection for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in the season of Epiphany: “We are *shown* who Jesus is, God’s own Beloved, we *hear* the Good News he brings, but we are also *called* to respond, and to *follow* in the way of blessing, not woe. How we respond, how we live, what we do, *matters*.”\*

Jesus gives no other directive as to how and what we should do. Still, he puts it out there for us his followers to envision the world as God sees it and wants things to be not just in the by and by but NOW because God’s Kingdom is in our midst.

“Blessed are YOU...” Jesus said, though it is sometimes hard to see. Still ALL God’s children are “blessed and highly favored.” The person sitting near you in a restaurant and the one wishing they could come in, the disheveled kid on a cell phone and the recluse who sits home alone, the man driving his Lexus and the young girl who walks blocks and blocks to school in threadbare shoes, the woman still working two jobs to make ends meet, and you and you and you...

This week take a moment or two and consider your blessings and then consider how you might share your blessings and blessedness to with someone else.

We thank you, God, for your blessings. May we live more fully into who we are meant to be-blessed and highly favored!

Amen.

\*”Being Blessed”, a reflection by Kathryn Matthews, Sermon Seeds, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany.