Liturgy that Matters

- February 16, 2025 -

Luke 6:17-26

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spiritual nourishment for collective liberation

TEXTS

February 16, 2025

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

What links the texts this week?

With the blessings often come warnings. With promises are often predictions of peril. The binary between the wicked and righteous may not always be most helpful, but it can help us remember how these parties are interrelated like predator and prey. The US executive branch has caught onto this use of binaries to express domination in their insistence on two genders. In this way, we can't read righteous and wicked as separate from one another. But if the dead can be resurrected, these positions can surely be transformed. The wicked are not exploitative by nature nor are the righteous doomed to victimhood forever. God in Her mercy intervenes on behalf of the downtrodden.

ORDER OF WORSHIP (click here for a text version of the liturgy)

Call to Worship

Blessed are those exploited by the rich
Blessed are those demonized by talking-heads
Blessed are those overworked and underpaid
Blessed are those trying, everyday, to get by
Blessed are Applachians
Blessed are immigrants
Blessed are Indigenous people
Blessed are Black people
Blessed are trans people
Blessed are educators
Blessed are healthcare providers
Blessed are incarcerated people
Blessed are victims of climate collapse caused by corporate greed
Blessed are community organizers
Blessed are those doing what they can with what they have

For these are the People of God.
For these are the People of God.
For these are the People of God.

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Opening Prayer

Jesus—friend of those oppressed by systems of harm—guide us on the path of your radical and wonderful solidarity. Connect us to the well of strength within ourselves to do what needs to be done today, honoring rest and play as part of "the work." Build strong bonds between us, that we may depend on one another for safety and support. Invite us towards personal and communal healing, so our care for each other may be deeply-rooted and long-lasting. Amen.

Invitation to Offering

"Woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation."

What material surplus is ours to release? What spiritual consolation is ours to be gained by living in solidarity with those made poor by systems of greed? Come, the gospel is clear—the material well-being of our neighbors is our concern. Let us bring what we have together.

Prayer of Dedication

God of Justice—many of us are struggling under the weight of cruel systems. We struggle to get housing, we struggle to get healthcare, we struggle to find safety, we struggle to afford food, we struggle because we are overworked, we struggle because we feel isolated. Woe to the greedy! Woe to the oppressors! Come, Holy Spirit, bless our solidarity, bless our love for one another, bless our offerings towards well-being for all. Amen.

Benediction

Blessed are you, weary one—
for Cosmic Love is on your side.
Go forth protected by community care,
and attuned to your inherent belovedness.

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SERMON PREP

Questions:

- How do spiritual leaders in your tradition talk about the rich? Are they rich themsleves? What are the theological implications there, and what adjustments may be needed to align more fully with the Gospel?
- How is the body honored inclusively in your community? What are ways people's bodies, often a site of exploitation or donimation, can be liberated and honored in corporate worship?
- Who feels most blessed in your ministry and why? How can your faith community bless those most in need?

Application

This week's sermon commentaries are written by Damon Garcia (he/him).

Cosmic -Who's blessed?

In today's vernacular we usually use the word 'blessed' to refer to people who are more fortunate. We think of ourselves as blessed when we recognize that we have something that others don't have, like shelter, food, or community. We also recognize small comforts and conveniences as blessings, like good parking spaces, toilet seat bidets, and existing at the same time as Beyoncé.

Jesus—as he does with everything—flips our understanding of blessing upside down. Or rather, modern Christians have flipped his original idea of blessing upside down. So let's flip it back over. The first century Jewish understanding of the word 'blessed' referred to God's special favor. It was a way of saying "God's on your side." Of course, Jesus loves everybody. That's one of the reasons we dig him. But when he has the opportunity to announce who God favors he doesn't say "You're *all* blessed." Jesus only announces God's favor to the poor, hungry, weeping, hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed communities.

The way Jesus used the word 'poor' is also different from how it's commonly used today. Biblical scholar Bruce J. Malina explains that, from the ancient Mediterranean perspective, the poor are those "who cannot maintain their inherited status due to circumstances that befall them and their family, such as debt, being in a foreign land, sickness, death (widow), or some personal physical accident."[1] Rather than a fixed social class, poverty functioned as "a sort of revolving class" of people whose misfortunes prevented them from sustaining their place in society. Malina further clarifies that "day laborers, landless peasants, and beggars born into such situations are not poor for economic reasons." Instead, anyone working for daily wages was considered "poor and needy" by wealthy elites, not necessarily because of a lack of money but because of "the precariousness of such a person's social position."

1 Bruce J. Malina, The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 99.

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In the same vein Jesus also used the word 'rich' differently from how we commonly do when he said "but woe to you who are rich." In the ancient Mediterranean context, the "rich" were not simply those with wealth but those who had gained it through exploitation. Malina explains that wealth was assumed to have been amassed by "depriving others; defrauding and eliminating others; prospering by having others become wretched, pitiable, ill, blind, and naked." The rich, then, were grouped alongside those who wielded power for self-aggrandizement, like kings and generals, and those who overstepped social boundaries. Malina specifies that in a moral sense, to be rich meant to be "powerful due to greed, avarice, and exploitation," just as to be poor meant to be "weak due to inability to maintain one's inherited social station."[2]

The rich and poor depend on each other for their existence. The rich are made rich by making others poor. When we read the Church Fathers we can see this view continued in the first few centuries of Christian teaching. In the fourth century St. Jerome said, "Every rich person is a thief or the heir of a thief."

The ancient concept of the blessing of the poor is captured in the 20th century liberation theologians' conviction that God has "preferential option for the poor." In other words, God prefers to opt for the poor. And the church ought to share this preference. Universal salvation and liberation are achieved through prioritizing the needs of the poor and oppressed. We are all set free when the oppressed are free. This is the kind of work that God calls us to and this is the work that Jesus embodied in his ministry. From this perspective we don't "bless the poor" by giving them what they need. We give the poor what they need because they are blessed.

Structural - Who's blessed in today's society?

In his 2025 presidential inauguration speech, Donald Trump announced "a golden age of America" in which his "legacy will be that of a peacemaker and unifier," while also dehumanizing immigrants, rejecting the existence of trans people, and promising to build a stronger military to defeat America's enemies. After the speech he proceeded to reverse several DEI-promoting policies. His legacy is proving to be one of division and vengeance, not unity and peace. Trump's dehumanizing rhetoric and policies define who he believes really matters in the world. Trump reverses Jesus's blessings and woes, declaring blessings on the rich and privileged and woes on the poor and marginalized.

In their book, *Queer Soul and Queer Theology*, queer theologians Laurel C. Schneider and Thelathia Nikki Young redeem the concept of redemption by reclaiming its etymological roots in the verbs "to deem", or "value". "To re-deem", they explain, "quite literally, means to rethink, re-imagine, and revalue the worth and existence of something or someone. Having been deemed worthless, queer lives are in a constant process of re-deeming ourselves."[3]

This type of redemption is the type of work that Jesus was doing in his blessing of the poor. In our blessing

2 Malina, 100.
3 Laurel C. Schneider and Thelathia Nikki Young, Queer Soul and Queer Theology (New York: Routledge, 2021), 8.

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of others, we deem who matters, and this is subversive work in a society that deems rich, white, privileged, cishet Christian men as the only ones who matter. Schneider and Young clarify, "because some lives are still deemed more valuable than others and some bodies are still deemed unworthy of respect, love, or protection, the commitment to be—to live all the way in one's body—is a constant and necessary work of queer resistance. It is a refusal to be dismissed, disassembled, disembodied, and ultimately dehumanized."[4]

Many preachers interpret this passage metaphorically, saying that "poverty" means spiritual humility. But Jesus is talking about material conditions. In Jesus's redefining of who matters, *matter* itself matters. Jesus doesn't say the poor are blessed because of internal qualities, such as being human, or having a divine soul, or being loved by God. Rather, they are blessed because of the external qualities of their material conditions. A common belief today is that who you are on the inside is what makes you matter, and that your material circumstances are secondary, or even irrelevant.

The idea that who we are on the inside is the only thing that matters is often twisted to justify dismissing people's identity and experience. Queerphobic Christians justify their bigotry by claiming that they love queer people's souls but reject their sexuality and gender expression. Racist Christians claim to only care about who people are underneath their skin color while denying the existence of discrimination based on skin color.

Jesus doesn't see it that way. Jesus cares about the whole person. Jesus tells the poor that they are favored by God because of who they are in their entirety, and gives special attention to their experience. We must reclaim this kind of blessing in our work today.

Interpersonal - How do we bless the people in our communities?

In our spiritual communities and our larger local communities, how do we respond to God's blessing of the poor? Practicing Jesus's kind of blessings must be reflected in the way we structure our communities. If we follow Jesus's example we must center the poor and marginalized by not just serving their needs, but also giving them the opportunity to lead and shape our communities, culture, and vision.

It's important to recognize that Jesus's blessings and woes were given in the context of crowds coming to Jesus to be healed. Jesus's healing work was the priority in his ministry. Many churches today have lost this spirit. Not only do they prioritize teaching over healing, but also rebrand Jesus as more of a teacher than a healer. The reason for this misconception is likely because Jesus is mostly presented to us by teachers, whether that be through sermons by preachers, or lectures by professors, or books by scholars. Today's spiritual leaders must find their own way to reclaim Jesus's healing ministry in our communities that are desperate for healing.

4 Schneider & Young, 59.

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Healing doesn't only look like curing physical ailments. Jesus was also healing the social divisions that people with physical ailments were forced into by a society that marginalized the sick and disabled. Their conditions made them outcasts, distanced from their communities. Healing goes hand-in-hand with movement-building to subvert the status quo. We must create communities that welcome the outcasts and re-deem the marginalized as valued and dignified individuals.

As we read this passage in community we're compelled to ask, "Where do I stand in this passage?" Those of us who are not among the poor should consider how our social position impacts our ability to truly embody Jesus's message. Jesus warns, "Woe to you who are full now...Woe to you who are laughing now." These statements may be unsettling because they challenge the comfort that many of us enjoy. Jesus's woes are not meant to shame, but to wake people up. If we are comfortable while others suffer, what does that say about our participation in unjust systems?

We're not just called to advocate for the poor, but also to build relationships with them. We must work together to actively dismantle the system that makes people poor–even when it threatens our own personal security. We must be willing to divest from the system that steals from the poor even if that looks like losing power, reputation, or resources. Responding to God's blessing of the poor means living in solidarity with the poor.

Words for inspiration:

Listen or check out the lyrics to "We're Blessed" by Fred Hammond and Radical for Christ. *"Late in the midnight hour, God's gonna turn it around! It's gonna work in your favor!"*

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