

EPIPHANY: CELEBRATING GOD'S GIFT FOR ALL PEOPLE

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 14, 2010

Proper 1

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

The Great Reversal

Luke's version of the Beatitudes declares that the poor, hungry, and sad are "happy," while the rich, the satisfied, and the joyous face terrible times. In a few verses, Luke upends our value system. We must deal with the Great Reversal.

In Luke's narrative, Jesus had attracted a group of disciples (6:1) from which he chose twelve apostles (6:13). Now the disciples and apostles joined him as he met a huge crowd and began to heal and to drive out evil spirits – actions that, for Luke, are signs of the in-breaking of God's kingdom (6:17-19). The beatitudes begin Jesus' instruction to his disciples. (Luke's "sermon on the plain," 6:20-49, is much briefer than Matthew's "sermon on the mount," that covers chapters 5—7 of his Gospel. Matthew also includes an extended version of the beatitudes, but he does not offer any woes. Luke's version is much sharper; Matthew tends to "spiritualize;" (compare Luke 6:20b with Matthew 5:3.)

The Greek word that begins each beatitude, *makarioi*, has been variously translated: "Blessed are..." (*NRSV*), "God will bless..." (*CEV*), or "Happy are..." (*GNT*). In ordinary conversation, the word was used in the sense of "how fortunate," "how lucky," "O the happiness of," or even "congratulations." The point is that God will bring about a new situation in the future, when the poor will be the blessed and happy ones, while the rich lose it all. The beatitudes do not suggest that the poor are happy right now in their situation, or that the rich at the moment are not enjoying the fruits of their wealth.

We can read the blessings and woes as Jesus' critique of the simplistic Deuteronomic view that faithfulness brings blessings and prosperity while wickedness brings many woes. Jesus is addressing his disciples and warning them that their faith itself amounts to a reversal of values in the world's eyes. Their faith – for Christians, the fullest expression of the promises to Israel – will be mocked by many of their contemporaries. Though rejected, like him, Jesus comforts his disciples that, in the end, they will be blessed (verses 22-23), while those who make nice with the world will face woes (verse 26).

While the fourth blessing and the fourth woe seem especially addressed to disciples both then and now, the first three blessings and woes seem to have an additional meaning. We

can read them as expressing Jesus' bias toward the poor, an accent Luke stresses. They reflect the vision for ministry that Jesus outlined in his initial teaching at the synagogue in Nazareth: "...[H]e has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor...to announce freedom for prisoners...to give sight to the blind...to free everyone who suffers..." (Luke 4:18, *CEV*). Thus, we direct our ministry toward relieving poverty and hunger, and comforting those who weep. At the same time, we, like the prophets of old, challenge the rich and comfortable in their contentment.

But when will the time come that the Great Reversal takes place everywhere and for everyone? In some ways, it becomes real now through our love for and support of those in pain. We strive toward making it a present reality, but given the depths of human sin, it's hard to imagine that happening. Many revolutions that promised the Great Reversal have come to naught. It will come in God's time. Meanwhile, we will experience it in heaven and, when Jesus returns, we can expect it as part of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1, *CEV*). "If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world" (1 Corinthians 15:19, *GNT*).

This week's Reflection was prepared by Rev. John S. Kerr, Executive Director of Lutheran Bible Ministries. Visit www.bibleministries.org to learn more about Lutheran Bible Ministries.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Iceland – With prayers that further publishing of the new Icelandic Bible will go well and be fruitful and that new programs will increase Bible reading and knowledge of the Scriptures; **Denmark** – With thanks to God for the successful *Good Samaritan* AIDS program in Africa, including the long-term project in Sierra Leone, and with prayers that the Bible will reach more people and new target groups with the new Danish mobile phone Bible and Christian educational material for schools, and with prayers for Bible work in **Greenland** and the **Faroe Islands**; **Norway** – With thanks to God for good progress with translating the full Bible into the two main Norwegian languages, and with prayers for work that is still underway on the Northern Sami and Southern Sami translations and that these texts will renew interest in Bible use; **Finland** – With thanks to God for the new Bible edition with the Deuterocanon, and with prayers for those who received the Sign Language translation of the *Jesus* film, for the follow-up of the program with churches to reach young adults, and with prayers for the translation projects in Northern Sami and other Finno-Ugric languages in partnership with IBT Helsinki; **Sweden** – With thanks to God for providing more opportunities for making the Word heard, and with prayers for God's blessing for the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the *Bible 2000* translation with a *Year of the Bible*, and with prayers for increased interest in and knowledge of the Bible in schools, churches, and people's everyday lives.

Activity Corner: "Leaves of Happiness"

Supplies needed: Bible; newsprint; marker; construction paper (assorted colors); pens or pencils; scissors; patterns in the shape of leaves; bowl or basket.

Compare Jeremiah 17:5-10 with Psalm 1. Discuss how these two passages describe the righteous person who trusts in God and obeys God and then discuss how these passages describe the person who turns away from God and does that which is evil. On a sheet of newsprint, make two columns with the headers:

Blessings/Happiness and Condemnation/Sorrow

In each of the two columns, write the key points from your discussion. Then read Luke 6:20-26 and discuss what Jesus says about happiness (blessings) and sorrow (woes). List the key points in the same columns on the sheet of newsprint.

Invite everyone to trace and cut out a leaf (or several leaves). On one side of the leaf, ask everyone to write "True Happiness," and on the other side, encourage each one to write what they have learned from Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1, and Luke 6:20-23 (either in their own words, or by copying key passages from Jeremiah 17, Psalm 1, or Luke 6). Gather the leaves into a basket or bowl and incorporate each one's thoughts into a closing prayer of thanksgiving. Conclude by having someone (or everyone together) read Luke 6:20-23.