

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 13, 2022 – EPIPHANY 6C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*God’s Upside-Down Kingdom*”

Jeremiah 17:5-10 (Blessed are all who trust in the Lord)
Psalm 1 (Happy are they whose delight is in God’s law)
1 Corinthians 15:12-20 (If Christ was not raised, our hope is in vain)
St. Luke 6:17-26 (Jesus speaks a series of “Blessed are you ...” and “Woe to you ...” sayings)

To appreciate today’s Gospel story, the beginning of the Sermon on the Plain, we need to understand how St. Luke leads up to it. Chapter 6 begins in a grainfield. Jesus and His disciples are harvesting and eating grain. Some of the Pharisees confront them with: “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

The next scene takes place in a synagogue. Jesus heals a man’s withered right hand on the Sabbath. Luke records that the scribes and Pharisees, “were filled with fury, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

Our Lord was facing some tough opposition! So, it’s not surprising that Jesus took His disciples and went up on a mountain to pray. He needed guidance and discernment from His Heavenly Father. Verse 12 tells us Jesus prayed all night.

In the morning, He called all of His disciples together and appointed twelve to be “Apostles”: Simon, whom He renamed Peter; his brother Andrew; James and John, the sons of Zebedee; Philip; Bartholomew; Matthew, the tax collector; Thomas; James, son of Alphaeus; Simon, the Zealot; Judas, son of James; and Judas who became a traitor. In today’s lesson, they’ve all come down from the mountain with Jesus. Verse 17 tells us they all “stood on a level place, with ... a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear [Jesus] and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.” This was a huge gathering. But it is a friendly one. No antagonists or protestors here. Jesus is with His followers and friends.

And because the people are hungry for Jesus’ teaching, He begins: “Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who are hungry now. Blessed are you who weep now. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.” “What?” we ask. “Is that true? Are we really blessed when such things happen to us?”

Following these four beatitudes—or “blessings”—are four woes: “Woe to you who are rich. Woe to you who are full now. Woe to you who are laughing now. Woe to you when all speak well of you.” Again, we are perplexed and want to know, “Is that really true too? Are we ‘in for it,’ when good things happen to us?”

We’re not sure we like the direction of Jesus’ sermon on the plain. He seems to be against all the values we all hold so dear. We try desperately to avoid what Jesus says is blessed. Who in the world wants to be poor? Why would anyone choose to be hungry? Does any one of us wish to mourn or be rejected and excluded? We work hard and go to great lengths *not* to experience those things.

And what about that “woes” list? Isn’t Jesus speaking about the very things we want? Maybe we don’t need to be *overly* wealthy, but we sure would like to have a comfortable amount of stuff. Perhaps our stomachs don’t have to be full *all the time*, but we certainly don’t want to go hungry. We want to be happy, to have good reputations, and to be included. What’s so wrong about that?

What Jesus is saying to His followers and friends does sound a bit strange! So, how do we make sense of these sayings? First, we need to hear His sermon not as a set of *commands*. Jesus is not telling us to go out and “get poor” or learn “how to weep” or put ourselves into situations where we “get persecuted.” The more we hear these beatitudes as commands (things we’re *supposed to do*) the less they make sense.¹

In fact, they are not spoken *as* commands. Jesus isn't giving orders here. Christ is not telling the crowd, nor is He telling us, or anyone else, to *do something!* Second, these statements are not value recommendations for our world, even though our world could use some values-revision.

For instance, some of you may have been following the recent controversy involving podcaster Joe Rogan and Spotify, an audio streaming service. Rogan has been widely criticized for hosting quack doctors that spread misinformation and lies about the pandemic and vaccines; pushing conspiracy theories; equating our government with Nazism; speaking graphically about lewd acts; and using racial slurs, including the “n-word.” He specializes in what is offensive and vile, yet Rumble—a video website—has now offered Rogan *a hundred million dollar contract* to leave Spotify.² What kind of values does this represent, when, according to the National Education Association, the starting salary of a public school teacher in Pennsylvania—who's trying to educate our children—is only around \$41,000 a year.³ And the average pay for a registered nurse in this Commonwealth is around \$63,000.⁴ Whereas, the Philadelphia Eagles' T. J. Edwards just signed a one-year contract for \$2,200,000, with a signing bonus of \$1,185,000.⁵

Our culture does have some weirdly skewed values, and the world could certainly use Jesus' core teachings: “love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you; turn the other cheek; and do unto others as you want done unto you.” But in today's story, Jesus isn't talking to the world. So, if the beatitudes are not value recommendations for our world, nor are they marching orders for Christ's followers and friends, what are they?

The beatitudes point us toward God and His Kingdom. They are about how God blesses His people, whether they are gathered on the plain at the foot of a mountain in Israel, or they are baptized in the Name of the Holy Trinity and are sitting here in Compass, this morning. The beatitudes are about how God blesses us in this life with what the world can never give, and how He blesses those who transition into the eternal kingdom God has prepared for all of His followers and friends.

Do you remember Jesus said: “My kingdom is not of this world”? (John 18:36) When Jesus talks about the blessings of the Father and His Kingdom, we should expect to see a lot of things we hardly ever experience in this world. I mean, where, in this world have you or I received forgiveness of all our sins? Where in this world do we experience mountain-moving prayer and truly unconditional love? And where in this world, do we ever encounter unmerited grace?

In His teaching about God's Kingdom, Jesus shows us how God wants to turn things upside-down. In our world, leadership often means “lording” authority over others, whereas Jesus demonstrates that true leadership is humbly *serv*ing others. That's upside-down!

You and I know a world where power rules with a mighty, oppressive, and at times, even an abusive, hand. Yet Jesus shows us that even the greatest divine power is to be deployed with compassion, kindness, and gentleness—and always for the benefit of others. That's upside-down!

You and I know a world where most people think “might makes right” and “get the other guy before he gets you.” Instead, through His crucifixion, Jesus modeled for us the ultimate giving up of self for the good of others. That's upside-down!

In these beatitudes Jesus gives us a special peek into God's Kingdom, hoping to move us to a higher vision of life, one that does not root itself in this world, but grounds itself in the very nature of a loving, merciful, and just God. In God's Kingdom, the poor are blessed! The hungry are blessed, as are the mistreated, and the rejected. They are blessed because they belong to a loving God who cares for, watches over, provides for, and comforts them. That's upside-down!⁶

St. Luke draws our attention to God's upside-down Kingdom very early in his gospel, when the Blessed Virgin Mary proclaims the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:46-56).

But these are not reversals and transformations merely for an ancient time. God wants these to be ongoing, right now, in the world in which *we* live! He says to us *today*:

Blessed are you, Kingdom people, even if you are poor, because poor people know they need help. And when you believe it is God who helps you, therein is the blessing. It's about God's Kingdom the world cannot give—or take away.

Blessed are you, Kingdom people, even if you are hungry, because hungry people look for food. And when you trust that God can provide, and supply all your needs, therein is the blessing. It's about God's Kingdom the world cannot give—or take away.

Blessed are you, Kingdom people, even if you are sorrowing. Those who weep look for comfort. And when you understand that God comforts all who are broken-hearted, and the fellowship of His people also brings us consolation, therein is the blessing. It's about God's Kingdom the world cannot give—or take away.

Blessed are you, Kingdom people, even if you are rejected and misunderstood. Marginalized people seek acceptance. And when you find this welcome in the loving arms of God and the fellowship of other believers, therein is the blessing. It's about God's Kingdom the world cannot give—or take away.

In His Sermon on the Plain, Jesus isn't giving us a prescription for blessings and rewards in this life. Rather, His gift to us is the assurance that those will be ours in the life to come—eternity with Him. And when we sincerely believe that, we *shall be* truly blessed! Amen.

¹ Adapt. Marv Mutzenberger, "It's All About The Kingdom," [SermonCentral.com](https://sermoncentral.com/sermons/it-s-all-about-the-kingdom-marv-mutzenberger-sermon-on-holiness-73886), 16 November 2004 <https://sermoncentral.com/sermons/it-s-all-about-the-kingdom-marv-mutzenberger-sermon-on-holiness-73886> 7 February 2022. Used with permission.

² Source: Marlow Stern, "Joe Rogan's Use of the N-Word Is Far From the Whole Story" [TheDailyBeast.com](https://www.thedailybeast.com/joe-rogans-use-of-the-n-word-is-far-from-the-whole-story), 8 February 2022 <https://www.thedailybeast.com/joe-rogans-use-of-the-n-word-is-far-from-the-whole-story> 8 February 2022.

³ Source: Tim Walker, "Teacher Pay Rises Modestly: 'Now Isn't the Time to Rest'" 26 April 2021, [NEA.org](https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/teacher-pay-rises-modestly-now-isnt-time-rest) <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/teacher-pay-rises-modestly-now-isnt-time-rest> 8 February 2022.

⁴ Source: Registered Nurse" [ZipRecruiter.com](https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Registered-Nurse-Salary--in-Pennsylvania) <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Registered-Nurse-Salary--in-Pennsylvania> 8 February 2022.

⁵ Source: "T. J. Edwards," [Spotrac.com](https://www.spotrac.com/nfl/philadelphia-eagles/tj-edwards-29509/) © 2022 <https://www.spotrac.com/nfl/philadelphia-eagles/tj-edwards-29509/> 8 February 2022.

⁶ Adapt. Mutzenberger, *op.cit.*