

## EPIPHANY 6, Feb. 17, 2019, Year C

- Our Gospel reading this morning begins with these words: "*Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place...*" Given how our Sunday lectionary readings obviously provide us with snippets of the Gospels, we don't always appreciate the context for the reading of the day. As Luke presents this story, Jesus has just come down from a mountain. He has spent the previous night on the mountain in prayer. *Following those many hours of prayer, he has chosen twelve apostles.* And now, *on the basis of his sustained prayers*, and his choice of his designated successors, Jesus offers what in Luke is the Sermon on the Plain. *Context is important.*
- As Luke presents this first and great example of the Lord's teaching, Jesus addresses his listeners after praying *all night* ~ the same night of prayer *preceding* his choice of the Twelve. Luke therefore puts Jesus' Beatitudes in a significant context. If you compare Matthew and Luke, you will see how they differ about Jesus' early and great 'sermon.' Matthew places it *on a mountain*, where Jesus addresses what Matthew calls "*the crowds.*" Luke, by contrast, presents Jesus' great sermon on a plain, *with a further notable difference.* *In Luke, Jesus' words are directed to his twelve newly designated apostles as well as to the wider community of disciples that he is gathering.* In other words, in Luke, *Jesus does not simply teach crowds*, who might or might not take on board what he shares. Instead, *he is forming and encouraging a community of disciples, who will follow him in how they live*, as well as preserve his teaching.
- Here is a question that can help us discern a thread running through our readings this morning. *Toward what do we live? For we *all* live toward something!* To one degree or another, *we all start by living toward ourselves.* And, all too easily, we arrive at a false conclusion ~ that the best way of living is to be *rich*, always having plenty to eat, with a life that is unburdened by cares and full of pleasurable entertainment. And having all these things, we also expect to have the positive regard of our neighbors and

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acquaintances. Whether consciously or not, these are the features of the life toward which most of us live. And *that toward which we live, therefore also shapes how we live.*

- If what I have said so far is true, *and I think it is*, then we may be surprised when we notice what Jesus says in our Gospel reading. “Woe to you who are *rich*... Woe to you who are *full* now... Woe to you who are *laughing*... Woe to you *when all speak well of you*...”! These words should startle us, because they represent a direct contrast with some of the values that characterize our community. *Think about this for a moment.* Our church was founded in the late 19th century as a mission to the south side of Grand Rapids, which was economically less advantaged. Then after fifty years or so, our parish moved here to the leafy suburbs, and built what might be the best church building in the diocese. *It is easy to notice what Grace may have gained by the move. But can we discern what may have been lost in the process.* As Jesus once asked, “For what will it profit them *to gain the whole world and forfeit their life*?”<sup>1</sup>
- Here is *the paradox* that may have been involved in that move. ~ *In seeking relocation to the leafy suburbs— our parish may have risked becoming like a shrub in the desert* (to borrow imagery from our reading from Jeremiah).<sup>2</sup> The risk was to come into spiritual circumstances where we would trust *less* in the Lord, and *more* in our own abilities and material attainments. And as a result become like those who live in the parched places of the wilderness, as if in an uninhabited salt land. As Paul, says in our reading from 1 Corinthians, “*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied*.”<sup>3</sup>
- Especially in Luke, Jesus’ *beatitudes* are the inverse of the *woes* he describes. *Blessed* are the poor, and those who are hungry. *Blessed* are those who weep, and those who are hated and excluded ~ all on account of

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the one who reveals what it means to be *truly* human. **These indications of blessedness** are about **what it means to be human in the way that God intends for us to be**. And they exemplify what it means **to be made in God's image**. This is because **people who are poor, hungry and who weep tend to live toward God, and toward power from God**, rather than toward **themselves**. They become like trees planted by streams of water.<sup>4</sup> For as our collect reminds us, the Lord is *the strength* of all who put their trust in God.

- Having reflected on this, we are better prepared to notice and appreciate **one particular sentence** of Luke's in our Gospel reading. He tells us that all in the crowd were trying to **touch Jesus, "for power came out from him and healed all of them."** Aware of their needs, people had come out to hear him and be physically healed, and cured of their unclean spirits. **The key was not simply their need, but more importantly their awareness of their need**. In Jesus' view, we are blessed *when are aware of* our need for transformation toward wholeness and flourishing. For we are then more likely to seek God's power to attain it. Yet, we are subject to woe when we are *self-satisfied* and *spiritually complacent*.
- So, either way, **we live toward that from which we receive power. And or, we seek to receive power from that toward which we live**. Either way, whether *from ourselves or from the Lord*, living toward one diminishes the other.
- Well, **are we a people who want power to come from the Lord?** That may be the most challenging question raised by today's Gospel. When power comes from him, **we have to be open to it, and want it more** than we do our own energy and efficacy. Since we tend to be so wedded to *our own* abilities, it becomes hard to let the Lord make things happen.
- So, let's push our big question: Do we **wish for** power to come to us from our Lord? Do we **desire** his power? Do we **hope for** his power? Do we

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**hunger** and **long for** his power, and therefore, *do we live toward it?* These are searching and personal questions. But they are also *community questions*, and questions that get at heart of our fellowship and our mission. For Jesus not only chooses and authorizes the special ministry of the twelve apostles. **He also gathers and empowers a community of disciples.** In sharing his power with everyone, he offers healing and cleansing. And he provides a pathway for us to wholeness and flourishing.



James Tissot, *Jesus Teaches by the Sea*

**Luke 6:17-26**

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

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

"Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Mark 8:36.

<sup>2</sup> This and the following sentences paraphrase of a portion of our reading from Jeremiah, 17:5-10.

<sup>3</sup> From 1 Corinthians 15:12-20.

<sup>4</sup> From Psalm 1, which parallels words in our Jeremiah reading.