

## Scripture Reading for February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

### Jeremiah 17:5-10 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. <sup>6</sup> They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. <sup>8</sup> They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

<sup>9</sup> The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? <sup>10</sup> I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

### Isaiah 61:1-3a (NRSV)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.

### Luke 6:17-26 (NIV)

<sup>17</sup> He [Jesus] went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, <sup>18</sup> who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, <sup>19</sup> and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

<sup>20</sup> Looking at his disciples, he said:

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

<sup>21</sup> Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

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

<sup>22</sup> Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup> “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

<sup>24</sup> “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

<sup>25</sup> Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

<sup>26</sup> Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

## Sermon: “Jesus Speaks Plainly on the Plain”

“Woe is me!” That was my reaction when I read this passage from Luke. You may be wondering why I even bother speaking on this matter, but you know that I won’t shy away from difficult texts and simply seek an alternative, such as a straight-forward, feel-good story about Jesus. Regardless of what I say in the next ten minutes, please remember that preachers are always speaking to *themselves* as much as to others, and especially in this case because Jesus is preaching to *his disciples* rather than curious bystanders. So let’s all take a deep breath and move forward together.

You have all heard of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel<sup>1</sup>; this is Luke’s version and it’s usually called the Sermon on the Plain. Why? Because Luke earlier says that Jesus went up the mountain to pray before then choosing the twelve disciples.<sup>2</sup> He then came down to a level area, preached to a crowd of Jews and non-Jews, and cast out demons and healed all those who came to him.<sup>3</sup> After which, he spoke specifically to his disciples. Jesus’ sermon, then, teaches *not* what must be done to *enter* the Kingdom of God, but what is expected of one who is already *in* the Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

Like the Beatitudes in Matthew, Luke begins with blessings. Listen again to how Jesus speaks plainly on the plain: “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.”<sup>5</sup> First, note that being “blessed” is not a state of happiness or bliss, rather it describes our *standing* or *status* before God.<sup>6</sup> Jesus begins by stating that the poor are *already* members of God’s kingdom; God evidently has a bias to the poor. And we are *shocked* by this, and so we should be! It *excludes* us, because on a global scale we are *all* rich – even if we are not millionaires! This would have been shocking to the disciples too because they thought they were part of God’s kingdom because they were *Jewish*, not because of

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<sup>1</sup> See Matt 5-7. Luke’s account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain has been so overshadowed by Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount that it is difficult to read Luke without comparing it to Matthew and noting the similarities and differences. The Sermon on the Mount extends over three chapters - 109 verses, whereas the Sermon on the Plain is packed into only 30 verses, and part of just one chapter. Despite that difference, the *sequence* of the sermon in Luke largely agrees with that of Matthew, giving the impression that there must have been a version of the sermon that predated both of them. It should be noted that Luke departs from Matthew in places and inserts material not found in Mark. Much of what is present in Matthew, but absent in Luke, concerns the relationship between Jesus’ teaching and the mosaic law. This would have been more interesting to Matthew’s Jewish Christians than to Luke’s non-Jews. It’s difficult to tell whether they have been *added* by Matthew or *omitted* by Luke!

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:12-16.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6:17-19, cf. Mark 3:7-10.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase “kingdom of God” appears 32 times in Luke, and this is the second – the first being In Luke 4:43.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:20-22. The final blessing of Jesus is for those members of the kingdom who experience unjustified opposition on account of being a follower of Jesus. “Remember your *good* standing before God *when* you experience hatred, exclusion, and slander,” says Jesus, “for when God’s kingdom comes in its fulness, and you *will* be vindicated by God. After all, that’s what happened to the prophets before you” (Luke 6:21-22; Matt 5:11-12; 1 Pet 3:14; 4:14). Luke’s beatitudes differ from Matthew’s in that Luke’s are in the second person plural rather than the third person, i.e., addressed to people rather than as propositions.

<sup>6</sup> See Deut 33:29; Ps 1:1; 40:4.

their bank balance.<sup>7</sup> Recall that wealth in those days was often perceived to be sign of God's *blessing*, not poverty. Some still think that today; clearly, they haven't read what Luke says Jesus said. Now, what we tend to do at this point is rush to Matthew's gospel and read: "Blessed are the *poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."<sup>8</sup> And then we say "*I'm poor in spirit*" so as to feel included! I'm sorry, that won't work. We can't know *why* Matthew felt the need to *add* - for the benefit of *his* readers - to what Jesus apparently said, but it domesticates Jesus' scandalous gospel.<sup>9</sup> Luke *doesn't* spiritualize the poor in terms of humility. All we can do is accept this difference and try and come to terms with it.<sup>10</sup>

Second, notice that in Luke's beatitudes there is a description of the present followed by a future promise; Jesus said: "You who are hungry *now will* be filled, you who weep *now will* laugh." Again, Matthew's altered beatitude, namely: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*," significantly softens the punch from Luke's shorter - and likely original - version. But the actual point is hunger and sadness are very real aspects of poverty; we cannot romanticize the condition of those who are poor. God clearly favors such people and one day, when God's kingdom comes in all its fulness, there *will be* a great role reversal, says Jesus. It's too easy to dismiss this as a hollow-sounding promise that will only be realized at the great wedding banquet for God's chosen.<sup>11</sup> However, God's generous provision is glimpsed in the later miracle of the feeding of the multitudes, something that's presented in all four gospels,<sup>12</sup> and further demonstrated in Luke's description of life in the early church in Acts.<sup>13</sup> God's vision of socio-economic reversal is, then, *not* just for the future but is the mission of the church *now*, says Luke.

Then Jesus comes to the four "*woes*,"<sup>14</sup> which - without doubt - are a prophetic *judgement*; but it's not the final judgement, rather it's a *warning*, a plea to change our attitudes and behaviors while we can so we can avoid grief and regret. Rich Christians are warned: your present life is as good as it gets. The affluent - who are well-fed and have care-free laughter now - will, in due course, experience a similar role-reversal and suffer a devastating loss. Jesus also issues a warning to Christians who are preoccupied with how they look in the eyes of others. False prophets can be popular, but following their path is ultimately one of ruin. Naturally, we are *stunned* by these uncomfortable judgements and want to erase them from the Gospel. Many people have taken scissors to the Bible to cut out the bits we don't like. That could result in something very popular and make for good TV ratings, but isn't the precisely what

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<sup>7</sup> (Peter was a middle-class fisherman; Matthew was a tax collector. Neither would have been poor!) While there is no declaration here about Israel, the teaching is consistent with the prophetic calls for justice for the poor (e.g., Amos).

<sup>8</sup> Matt 5:3. (The *shorter* version is usually considered the original; folk *add* to texts - to "clarify" - rather than subtract.)

<sup>9</sup>This inclusion does not exclude the poor, but simply shifts the emphasis. The "*poor in spirit*" are *not* those to claim a robust ego or a strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity is their security in God.

<sup>10</sup> See also Luke 16:19-31.

<sup>11</sup> See Ps 107:9; Isa 25:6; Luke 14:7-14.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:12-17, John 6:1-14. (This is the only miracle—aside from the resurrection—recorded in all four gospels.)

<sup>13</sup> See Acts 4:42-47; 4:32-36.

<sup>14</sup> See Luke 6:23-26. This is the only significant addition in Luke to Matthew; however, see also: Matt 23:13-39. Note: Luke makes use of that word "*woe*:" more than any other gospel - 15 times in all (Luke 10:13; 11:42-47, 52; 17:1; 21:23; 22:22).

it means to be a false prophet?<sup>15</sup> Remember, blessings and woes are the language of the Old Testament prophets, and Jews were long familiar with such rhetoric, as we heard from our earlier reading from Jeremiah.<sup>16</sup> Both Jesus and John the Baptist were part of that prophetic tradition, so why are we surprised when Jesus actually sounds like a prophet?! I suggest we humbly and honestly wrestle with the texts, the bits we like and the bits we don't, ultimately relying on the grace of God and not our achievements or perceived status.

Preachers are often asked, "What's their favorite Gospel?" Many say Luke because his Gospel is considered the most inclusive of non-Jews; after all, Luke wasn't Jewish. We also love the powerful parables of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan, both unique to Luke's Gospel. Perhaps after today, we're not so sure! It's certainly true that Luke expounds the dangers of wealth more than any other Gospel writer. Let me give you a few examples: (a) Mary, in the Magnificat, proclaims "God has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."<sup>17</sup> That's another great reversal, and sometimes called "the upside-down kingdom of God." (b) There's also the story of the unwise rich man who tore down his barns to built bigger ones for his surplus grain, only to die that very night.<sup>18</sup> That was another of Jesus' warning to those who think their present abundance ensures their future security. (c) Then there's the parable of the great banquet where the wealthy were so preoccupied with their possessions that they make all kinds of lame excuses in response to God's invitation.<sup>19</sup> (d) And what about the story of the rich man with the beggar, Lazarus, at his gate?<sup>20</sup> (e) Finally, there's the rich man who left Jesus sad because he wouldn't sell everything and give it to the poor.<sup>21</sup> You'll recall that Jesus concluded: "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."<sup>22</sup> What all this tells us is that our unnerving passage this morning is *not* an outlier but part of a major theme in Luke. If we take a pair of scissors to his Gospel – and to the others, we will have a lot of cutting to do! This, then, is Jesus' raw, unvarnished, faith-rattling declaration of what life in God's kingdom is about. What are we to do? I offer us a message of hope and a challenge.

First the hope. Although Jesus says it's nearly impossible for the rich to enter heaven, Luke tells several stories of wealthy people who become followers of Jesus and so enter the kingdom of God. Zacchaeus, the one who climbed up sycamore tree, was rich - and likely got his wealth by unscrupulous means.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Jer 5:31; Mic 2:11.

<sup>16</sup> Jer 17:5-10; see also Isa 5:8 -23; Amos 6:1; Hab 2:6-19; Deut 28; 30:15-20.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 1:53; in v52, there's another reversal: "God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble." This song reveals the kind of messiah Jesus will be and the message of his future ministry.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 12:15-21.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 14:13-24.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 16:19-31, See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/God-and-Money.pdf> . (This parable was unique to Luke.)

<sup>21</sup> Luke 18:18-30; Mark 10:17-27; Matt 19:16-30. See:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wealth-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf> .

<sup>22</sup> Luke 18:25; see also Matt 19:24; Mark 10:25.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 19:1-10, esp. v2. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Seeking-and-Saving.pdf> .

Remember what he said to Jesus, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, as I mentioned a moment ago, another rich man who came to Jesus wasn’t able to let go of his wealth and so went away sad - unlike Barnabas who sold a field and gave the money away,<sup>25</sup> and Cornelius, a devout non-Jew who gave generously to those in need.<sup>26</sup> Note, it’s *not* about the amount a person gives, it’s about the *attitude* of a person towards their wealth and possessions.

That hope leads us to this challenge: are we prepared to live *more simply*?

St Francis (1181-1226) and St. Clare<sup>27</sup> (1194–1253) of Assisi both came from wealthy families and, to their parents’ shock, felt spiritually compelled to travel the path from privilege to poverty by living simply alongside those who were poor and sick. As they saw it, God gave up everything to become human in the person of Jesus,<sup>28</sup> and that required them to give up everything in response. In letting go of wealth and prestige, Francis and Clare found abundant life and they invite us to consider *our* attitude to possessions and status. For example, *are we prepared* to find new ways to live simply so that others can simply live?<sup>29</sup> And what changes *are we prepared* to make to have an ecologically sustainable planet? Those who are poor across the world are often more sensitive to the fragility of all life and our environment and, conversely, we who are rich are more desensitized and so need to be awakened to the interdependence of all life. As Gandhi once said: “There is enough for our need, but not for our greed.” Privilege, then, promotes apathy to the needs of others and of our planet.<sup>30</sup> *Are we prepared* to reject unbridled materialism and consumerism in an expression of solidarity with those whose lives have been determined by others to be one of poverty and need? That’s the challenge – to live more simply and be more ethically responsible. We may not be able to live as radically as Francis and Clare, but consciously taking incremental, positive steps to live more simply results in spiritual freedom; it makes us more mindful of our dependency on God and others, rather than just in ourselves and our bank balance. For many that’s a scary thought; but that’s precisely the point!

As I move towards a conclusion, remember neither Jesus nor Francis and Clare idolized or glorified the enforced poverty of the masses. They recognized the despair, anguish, and hopelessness of the politically and economically powerless. They were aware that poverty can crush the spirit and rob children of their imaginations. Yet those who are poor *know* they *can’t* make it on their own. They depend on powers outside of themselves – including God - for their survival and wellbeing, and they

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<sup>24</sup> Luke 19:8 – and Jesus responds: ““Today salvation has come to this house [for] . . . the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (v9-10). (cf. Luke 18:18-30; 21:1-4.) Note: in principle, no one can be privately righteous while participating and profiting from a program that abuses and crushes people.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 4:36-37.

<sup>26</sup> Acts 10:2. (And perhaps Lydia too, Acts 16:14)

<sup>27</sup> The founder of the Order of Poor Ladies.

<sup>28</sup> See Phil 2:6-11, esp. v6-8; this is widely regarded as an early hymn.

<sup>29</sup> That quotation is attributed to St. Elizabeth Seton (1774-1821), the first US person to be canonized by the Catholic Church.

<sup>30</sup> The illusions privilege brings is the belief that we are immune from suffering, aging, death, and economic insecurity.

have solidarity with fellow-sufferers. In such situations, individualism simply doesn't work. And, actually, rugged independence goes against God's heart and vision for creation – that spirit was the sin of Adam!

As I said at the beginning, we are astonished by Jesus' declaration that those who are poor *already* have good standing before God. In fact, we might even shout, "That's not fair!" Gustavo Gutierrez, the South American Catholic, liberation theologian explains it this way: "God has a preferential love for the poor *not* because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they *are* poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will."<sup>31</sup> And while we digest what he said and wonder if it's really true, recall what God said to Moses at the burning bush: "*I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*"<sup>32</sup> God's *compassion* for those who suffer, and who are in bondage for no fault of their own, results in God *acting*; that tells us something about God's nature and priorities. What God's wants to do is to instigate a great role reversal – from slavery to freedom, from hunger and hardship to the abundance of luxury food. What Jesus says in the Sermon on the Plain is perfectly consistent with this foundational story of the people of Israel, and in-keeping with the messages of the prophets – like our second reading from Isaiah.

So, what does God do next? He says to Moses: "I am sending *you* to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." In the same way today, *God wants us* to be his ambassadors to address every kind of injustice. Why? Because God still has his bias to the poor - and the unfairness and discrimination is primarily a result of human beings – including you and me.

Scared? We are in good company; Moses was afraid. God simply told him, "I will be with you."<sup>33</sup>

So, what are we going to do? Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>31</sup> He adds" "The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is *not* in the poor themselves but in God, in the graciousness and universality of God's love."

<sup>32</sup> Exod 3:7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Exod 3:9-12. Read on: Moses felt very inadequate and made many excuses!