

“Surprising Teaching”

Luke 6:17-26

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In today's gospel the focus is on Jesus as a teacher and healer. I have such admiration for teachers that I am always moved when I think of Jesus as the master teacher. These verses give us clues as to why Jesus was so effective in his teaching. In verse 17, we read that “he came down with them and stood on a level place.” Isn't it just like a good teacher to come down to her or his student's level and be present with them, to start with where they are and then lift them to a new understanding? Perhaps you've known teachers who seemed to get pleasure out of being aloof and profound lecturers, smarter than anyone else. But Jesus was not that way and that's one reason his teaching was so effective. Often the best teachers of young children get down on their level so that they are face to face and eye to eye with the little ones.

Another thing that made Jesus such a good teacher was that he did not ignore the basic needs of his students. A teacher's words don't mean much if the student has a stomach ache because they are sick or hungry. The people not only came to *hear* Jesus but to be *healed* of diseases and cured of troubling spirits. And so Jesus healed and relieved their suffering and calmed their troubling spirits because he understood that it's hard to learn anything if basic human needs are not met.

Then Jesus begins his teaching outline for the day. The topic is summarized with the subtitle, “blessings and woes.” The word “blessing” used here carried a euphoric connotation. For Jesus students “blessings” referred to the happiness of the gods. It means joyful beyond message. The gods are not affected by the trials and tribulations of the world.

At first glance the message seems to say that we're better off if we're suffering, poor, hungry, and sorrowful. I remember thinking as a child when I read these verses that suffering was a good thing and I shouldn't be very happy or in the end, I'd get punished for it. Jesus goes on to say that those who are rich, satisfied, and joyful, will not be that way forever because the world is going to be turned upside down by the power of God.

What are we suppose to make of this text? Are we to try not to be happy people? Are we to force ourselves to be destitute and wear a frown instead of a smile? There are a couple of things we must consider before we go, sell all we have, and become street people in the name of discipleship. In the world of 1st century Palestine, there was no middle class. There were a very few rich people who mainly got rich off the backs of others. The majority of people barely survived. Jesus message is this: **the well being of any one or a few people cannot be bought at the expense and abuse of others.**

Today we know of wealthy people who do a lot of good. I read an article once about Joan Kroc of McDonald's. She would drive down to locations where she was thinking of building community centers for children and she would watch the comings and goings of the neighborhood and carefully think through how money might be used to lift children up from poverty. The article said that she invited people to a Christmas party not long before she died and without her guests knowing what she was up to, she listened to their dreams for their particular charity. They didn't know they were being interviewed for bequests in her will or even that she was terminally ill. But after her death her carefully laid plans for distributing her wealth were revealed; plans that will benefit thousands of people in the future.

So wealth can be used for great good. But whether we realize it's happening, we in this nation with so much wealth and consumerism are invariably abusive to many people around the world without our even being conscience of it. So much of the products we buy are purchased on a world market where distributors are interested only in the bottom line--how much money

can I make off this product? We hear often of workers' ill treatment, low wages, and deplorable working conditions and we may not know if the goods we purchase were manufactured through unjust labor practices.

As Christians we must do the best we can to care about this! If our desire for consumption feeds into unjust treatment of our fellow human beings, we are indirectly complicit. We must do all we can to pay attention to this issue because most large companies will not care unless we as consumers force them to care by the power of the purse. This is why we sell Equal Exchange coffee after worship. Coffee is a huge means of economic livelihood in the world, but most coffee farmers live in poverty. By eliminating several middle stages of the distribution process, Equal Exchange can offer the coffee farmers a more just portion of their product.

What Jesus is teaching is not an anti-wealth pro-poor religion. One can be anti-wealth and be doing it for all the wrong reasons. Jesus is saying that the new world order, God's kingdom come, is a time when all people trust in the unseen God. So that if we are poor, our lives are not spent with getting rich, and if we are rich our lives are not consumed by protecting our wealth. Whether we are blessed is not tied to the ups and downs of the stock market. Jesus says God is fighting for our hearts. Neither being rich or poor brings salvation, but trusting in the unseen power of love and goodness in the world is salvation.

The second consideration of this text is to notice that Jesus' message throughout the gospels but especially the gospel of Luke is a message of paradox and reversal. The kingdom of this world will be turned upside down and the kingdom of God will eventually reign forever and ever. This message brought hope to the peasants of 1st century Palestine. The world order, the Roman Empire, that brought them pain and misery would one day not control them, and God's kingdom would take its place. The teachings of Jesus brought comfort to those afflicted by the current world order and discomfort to those who reaped the rewards of an evil world order. The powers of this world would one day be brought down by the greater power of God.

Jesus also makes the contrast between true prophets and false prophets. He says that true prophets are those who say things that make people mad, things people don't want to hear. False prophets, on the other hand, please the people. They tell them what they want to hear--like a lot of politicians seeking election.

I need to hear this message. For 40 years of my life I struggled to pay bills and take care of my girls. I remember a time when I went on a diet because I worried about having enough food for my children. Obviously, that was a long time ago. Since graduating, receiving a call to ministry, and marrying Tom, money has not been the issue that it was for so many years. But, I still find myself worrying about money or pondering how to protect the possessions I've now acquired in case of an earthquake or a stock market crash. I'm the person Jesus was trying to teach that day. He was reaching down to me, meeting me at my level, sensing my spiritual need, and reminding me that it is ultimately trust in the God of the universe that will bring peace and wholeness and harmony to my life.

Jesus' surprising teaching concerning true and false prophets is also a lesson for me. Not that I consider myself a prophet, but I always want to please people. A lot of the time that's no problem. I love people and have many friends and in general I find ways to avoid conflict. But Jesus reminds us all that sometimes we must say things that people don't want to hear. The best we can hope for is to say them at a teachable moment when the hearer is ready to hear and receive the word. So Jesus is saying to me, "Joyce, get over it, stop worrying about pleasing everyone. You're called to be faithful to my message. Trust God."

Today may we listen to the surprising teachings of Jesus. May we learn to lay our burdens down and to trust our whole hearts to God knowing that God understands the yearnings of our hearts better than we do ourselves and that God is faithful today and always. AMEN