

Sermon on Luke 6: 17-26

Rev. Andi Fox, United Church of Broomfield

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Friends, I really wanted to preach today about trees. Trees are an important image in the Bible and a great metaphor for talking about resiliency and community. The first story about humans after their creation is about a tree. The last chapter of Revelation involves a tree. Trees are a reoccurring metaphor. Trees have stood the test of time. Trees share resources. Trees are pretty cool. But this morning I just can't. There are somethings that happened this week that lit a fire in me. I'm angry and tired. I think some of you are angry and tired, and I think we need to talk about how we follow Jesus in this time and place. But I'm not just sharing my anger with you, I'm also going to talk about what we can do with that anger. So let's dive in to our Gospel reading.

This passage from the gospel of Luke is part of what's called the Sermon on the Plain. It's the equivalent to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount but instead of Jesus on a mountain with flowery poetry, we get Jesus on a plain, a level place, speaking a bit plainer. Blessed and woe are particular terms used here to make an emphasis, a very down-to-earth, tangible emphasis. Blessed means happy, fortunate, favored. So we could read 'blessed are the poor' as 'favored are the poor.' This doesn't mean if you are poor God will bless you or if you help the poor God will bless you. The meaning is 'God privileges the poor.' If you are poor, you are favored by God. In the Roman Empire, the rich and powerful were considered blessed. Blessedness wasn't something you received so much as something you were. For example they would call Caesar was "blessed."

"Woe" is a traditional prophetic term that laments misfortune, pronounces judgment, or warns of impending doom. The prophets of Israel used the term 'woe' to call out the Israelites for turning away from God. Woe to you - you're going to reap what you have sown. You will suffer not in some far off afterlife but in the here and now.

Calling the poor blessed by God was turning over the social order which happens often in Jesus' ministry. Jesus wasn't killed by the Roman Empire because he told those in power what they wanted to hear. Jesus didn't stand up and agree with the Empire saying 'blessed are the rich' or 'blessed are the powerful.' He said, "blessed are the poor." "Blessed are the hungry." "Blessed are you who weep." This is the gospel message - in God's Kin-dom the last will be first, and the first shall be last. Jesus, Immanuel, came not as a political prince but as the prince of peace. Jesus the King of Kings was born into a poor household. Jesus the Alpha and Omega and his followers were poor and oppressed. Jesus the True Vine came to shake the foundations of the worldly powers that condemned so many to live in poverty and fear and violence.

Those worldly powers are still at work today and sometimes have the name of Jesus projected onto them. The rich are hijacking our government to make themselves richer and hurt the lives of those poorer than them which is basically everybody else. This week Elon Musk tweeted out an image of a white girl smiling up at the term DOGE (The Department of Government Efficiency that Musk runs) that said "Watching Trump slash federal programs knowing it doesn't affect you because you're not a member of the Parasite Class." Musk added "Why 90% of America loves DOGE" with a laughing-so-hard-I'm-crying emoji. One of my favorite writers, Diana Butler Bass, said that reading Jesus in Luke 6 feels like Jesus is

subtweeting Musk, the world's richest human: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Those who rely on federal programs aren't parasites. They are generally the poor or the struggling or the oppressed or the disabled or the young or the elderly. All people we are told in scripture to care for. We often have no idea who is struggling financially and who is relying on assistance. Strangers, neighbors, ourselves, folks who seem well-off but aren't. Any number of people. They, maybe even we, aren't parasites - they are a blessing to our world.

I'm not a fire and brimstone preacher, but a fire has been stoked in me. Every day there seems to be new reasons to be angry. I don't need to list the things happening in our government. I'm sure you've heard about them. We all have issues that tug on our heart strings and cause anxiety in our guts. Jesus lays out clearly how to treat people not just in this passage in Luke but throughout the New Testament, and it didn't come from nowhere. The prophets lay out clearly what is right and wrong in the Jewish Bible. There are nuances and adaptations, but there's still a strong thread connecting everything. Take care of the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Feed the hungry. Do what's right even when it's difficult. Don't let power go to your head. Trust God and follow God's ways. This is summed up in the often quoted Micah 6:8 - "[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

The question now is - given the past four weeks, how can we survive the next four years? How do we live out Jesus' teachings with a government seemingly bent to do the opposite of what Jesus taught? I have four tips that I am trying to follow. First, you want to stay informed but not at the cost of your own mental health. Invest in some independent media and set boundaries around your consumption of news. When a news story breaks, try not to react to it in anger. (Sometimes we preach what we need to hear.) When talking to another clergy friend, she encouraged me to channel that initial reaction into prayer. We've seen executive orders come out and get taken back within 24 hours. Wait 48 hours and check back on the news story. By then more in depth coverage about what's going on will be written and organizations who have been working in that area for years will have put out statements about what to do. We have to realize that the overwhelm and exhaustion is part of the plan. Our anger can't be a wildfire. It needs to be a welding torch. Concentrated.

Second, find local groups who are already involved in what you're passionate about. Good news! You're already participating in one. Community is what will see us through this time and empower us to do things that matter. That may mean participating in protests. Get in with a group who knows how to protest well and as safely as possible. That may mean educating others. Get with a group experienced in that. Give money if you can. Volunteer if you can. If nothing else, sign up for their newsletter and follow their social media accounts.

Third, contact your elected officials. I am a Millennial. I hate calling people, but that is the quickest and best way to let these officials know where you stand on issues. Officials log every call to keep track of opinions given by their constituents. I use a website and app called 5 Calls. 5 Calls will educate you on topics, give you your representatives' contact information, and provide a script for you to use. If you're like me and hate calling, call sometime when you're likely to get the answering machine. Leave your full name and address so they know you're a real constituent.

Fourth, rest. Breathe. Take breaks. Play games. Read novels. Take up a new craft. Go for coffee with a friend. Watch a romantic comedy. I've seen a lot of Gen X and Boomer gay men on social media talking about the difficulties during the AIDS crisis. They said that they buried their friends in the morning, protested in the afternoon, and danced all night. It was the dancing that kept them going. Joy. Hope. Love. Trust. Community. We are in this for the long haul, and it is these things that will keep us going.

To recap - Stay informed but not at the cost of your mental health. Find groups to participate in and participate. Contact your elected officials. Rest. We are people who care, often deeply. We are people who believe the world can be different, and we have a Savior who has set the vision of a different world for us. We're also just normal people who have to deal with our boss and drive our kids around and shovel the driveway and make dinner and worry about our credit score and do all the other things we have to do in our lives. We have the vision. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who meditate on God's law. Blessed are those who trust God. We are the hands and feet of Christ to this world to make that different world happen. Even if we're angry or exhausted or hate calling strangers on the phone there are things we can do to make this earth look a bit more like heaven. I'm so thankful to this community for being a place that is safe for me to share my anger and thoughts about being a Christian today. I know not everyone is going to agree about everything, but we are the Body of Christ. We don't let go of hope. We don't let go of joy. We are the answers to each other's prayers. So, let us pray.

Holy, eternal, and loving God - we thank you for this community and its witness to the teachings of Jesus. We thank you for the range of emotions we can feel as humans. Help us to channel anger into action and despair into hope. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.