

Sunday February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
6<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany

**PRAYER:** O Christ, whom even crucifixion could not separate from either the love or the power of God, bless us, the members of your body, with the guidance of your spirit, that we might seek God with your singleness of mind, see God with your clarity of understanding, and worship God with purity of heart. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** Our God has said, “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for our own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” Let us therefore, be assured of our forgiveness upon the trustworthiness of God’s word. (Isaiah 43:25)

**OFFERTORY SENTENCE:** God speaks to us from Malachi 3:10 with these words “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do’, says the Lord Almighty, ‘I will open the window of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in! Try it! Let me prove it to you!’”

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O Lord, you both judge and pardon. In long days past you declared your law among us. Yet, through the centuries of our history and the years of our lives, we have smashed your tablets upon the stones. We have broken your commandments. We cried out that your way was too difficult.

So, you sent your law again. But instead of making your way easier, this time you tried to write it upon our hearts. You sent Jesus of Nazareth, and he went beyond the letter of the law to its spirit. He declared us guilty before we even acted. He made us aware of the battles that rage within us before accusing us of the wars that rage around us. Not only the actions of our hands, but the motives of our hearts, were put on trial, and we were found wanting.

Yet he forgave us. Even those of us who crucified him. He showed us something terribly important about who you are and how you love, and about how you judge. It is not for your sake, but ours, that you convict us and then give us the freedom to try again. Your law of love is impossible to keep, yet we must try; your forgiveness of sin is impossible to believe, yet we must trust.

Help us to trust that you are greater than the most loving human parent. We humans have an end to our patience and a limit to our strength. Our faith wavers, our hope dims, our love stumbles over pride. But you are infinitely patient and strong beyond compare. Your faith and your hope and your love abide, but the greatest of these is love.

We have heard that it was said in ancient times, “You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, and you shall not bear false witness.” But today we hear again the greatest of all commandments, that we will love the Lord our God and our neighbours as ourselves.

It is not an easy Way. But as you have chosen us, we chose you. Keep us in the Way we must go, O Lord, our judge and Redeemer.

**BENEDICTION:** In this place, we have proclaimed the presence and power of the risen Christ with the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts. Now, as we go forth to our places of work, let us demonstrate the presence and power of the risen Christ with the deeds of our hands and the labour of our lives. Amen.

Sunday February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
6<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany

Luke 6:17-26  
“What’s He Talking About?”

One Sunday the Pastor told his congregation that the church needed some extra money and ask the people to prayerfully give a little extra in the offering plate. He said: "Whoever gives the most would be able to pick out three hymns." After the plates were passed, he noticed that someone had place a \$1,000 bill in the offering. He was so excited that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation and said he'd like to personally thank the person who placed the money in the plate.

Well, there quietly in the back, sat Rosie, who shyly raised her hand. The Pastor asked her to come to the front. Slowly she made her way up front to the Pastor. He told her how wonderful it was that she gave so much and in thanksgiving ask her to pick out three hymns. Her eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation, pointed to the three most handsome eligible men in the building and said: "I'll take **him and him and him**!"

It was a momentous day for twelve men. Jesus had been praying on the top of a mountain all night long. As he begins to descend from the mountain at daybreak, he comes upon a crowd that had gathered, and was waiting for him part way up the hill. There is an anxious pause among those gathered. What will Jesus do? What will Jesus say? Did anything exciting happen while he was at prayer?

Jesus pauses, then he walks among the people gathered, and selects out of the crowd, Simon (called Peter), Andrew (Peter’s brother), James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the Zealot), Judas (son of James) and Judas Iscariot (who would later betray him). There you have it, the twelve disciples, representative of the twelve tribes of Israel; the men who would be closest to Jesus as he taught and ministered.

How do you think they felt? What questions must have raced through their minds? What did they envision was to be their destiny and that of Jesus? Were they excited, frightened, confused or maybe a little of all the above? It did not matter though, because they were selected, against any objections, or excuses they may have had. So, as this great adventure begins, what are the first words Jesus is recorded as having said to them?

I am sure he said something like, “Men, this is going to be a great journey. You are going to love it! There will be surprises around every corner.” That sounds about right, but Jesus didn’t say anything like that. Instead he says things like “God blesses: the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated because of him.” Then for good measure he throws in, “Woe or sorrows await those who are: rich, satisfied, laugh carelessly, and those who are praised by the crowds.”

Why did he start with these words? I have said many times, we must know not only the words of scripture, but also the context in which they occur. So, what is happening as Jesus speaks to his disciples? As soon as the disciples are selected, Jesus marches them down the mountain, and as they are making their way down, crowds begin to press in upon this little parade. The crowd was made up of people from all over the country.

Sunday February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
6<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany

Why were they there? To be healed by Jesus and many were. So, in this context, Jesus turns to his disciples in verse 20 and talks of blessings and curses. Why? I think it was to address, right at the very beginning of their journey as disciples, a temptation. The temptation being that it would be easy for the disciples to get caught up in the euphoria of Jesus' ministry; to be overcome by the popularity, and to forget the point.

What was Jesus ministry trying to achieve? Why did he heal the sick? Multiply loaves and fishes to feed hungry people? Endure incredible pain and suffering on the cross? It was certainly to bless us, but not in the way most people think of blessing. Ask most people what they think of when we speak of blessing, and quite often people respond by identifying material wealth as their blessing.

Sometimes we refer to food on our table as a blessing, or laughter as a blessing or praises from the crowd as a blessing. Jesus doesn't call those things blessings; he calls them curses. Why; because they distract us from seeing the true blessing, Christ offers. Material "blessings" can be a curse according to Jesus and we must wrestle out the reason why. William Boice caught onto this problem when he wrote this little prayer.

*Dear Lord, I have been re-reading the record of the Rich Young Ruler and his obviously wrong choice. But it has set me thinking. No matter how much wealth he had, he could not ride in a car, have any surgery, turn on a light, buy penicillin, hear a pipe organ, watch TV, wash dishes with running water, type a letter, mow a lawn, fly in an airplane, sleep on a innerspring mattress, or talk on a phone. If he was rich, then what am I?*

So, how does being poor, hungry, being grief stricken, or being persecuted: even begin to seem like a blessing? Well perhaps we need to ask what people in these situations all have in common. For an appropriate answer to that question we turn to Mother Theresa, who is quoted as saying these few but very profound words. "You will never know that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you get."

No truer words could have been said in reaction to this scripture lesson. Blessings, it seems, arise not out of what we possess but out of what we trust. If we have lots of resources, and life is easy for us, and people are praising us, we tend to feel good about ourselves. That may not be a bad thing, unless we begin to also place our trust in our own wealth, our own popularity, our own good luck or intellect.

When life is good, instead of thanking God for it, we might be tempted to pat ourselves on the back. And further, when we have everything we need materially, and socially, we might be neglectful of the life of prayer, because the one sure thing in Christendom, is that need brings people to prayer. Need brings us by necessity to God. Take for example the story of the minister who dies and is waiting in line at the Pearly Gates of heaven.

Ahead of him is a man dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans. Saint Peter says to this man, "Who are you, so that I may know whether to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?" The man replies, "I am Joe Cohen, taxi driver from New York City." Saint Peter consults his list.

Sunday February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
6<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany

He smiles and says to the taxi driver, “Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” The taxi driver goes into heaven with his robe and staff, and then it is the minister’s turn. He stands quite tall and straight and booms out, “I am Joseph Snow, pastor of Saint Mary’s for the last 43 years.” Saint Peter consults his list. He then says to the minister, “Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“Just a minute!” says the minister. “That man was a taxi driver, and he gets a silken robe and golden staff. How can this be?” “Up here, we work by results,” says Saint Peter. “While you preached, people slept. While he drove, people prayed.” The reality is that need, often drives relationship; maybe all of our relationships.

Just think for a moment about how many relationships we have that are based on need. How many people do we interact with, and stay connected to, only because they can do something for us? Parents often complain that their children only call them, or come to see them when they need something. “What is it now?” a frustrated father or mother will say to their children.

Sociologists will even argue that our friendships remain strong so long as they return something to us, be it companionship or whatever. In fact, many people only have a relationship with a church family, because it gives them something they need, even beyond their spiritual needs. A faith community can often be a person’s only source of encouragement, sympathy, or in some cases even more tangible needs like food and resources.

Marriages can also be based on gratifying needs. Many separated and divorced people talk about how their former spouse no longer satisfied their needs; so, they left. It is our human nature, it seems, to form our relationships around needs, so if we don’t feel we need anything in this life, why relate to God? Now you see what Jesus is driving at, and why he felt it necessary to address these concerns directly to the disciples.

It was as if Jesus were saying, “This relationship we are going to share, is not going to make you rich, or keep you well fed, or keep you laughing, or make you popular. Those things might happen on occasion, but they are not the priority or what I want to teach you. Your relationship with me, and in turn with God, has to be something deeper and more significant than just what you are going to get out of it.”

The mere fact God wants us to relate to him, should be far more valuable than “all the tea in China”. By the way, in the latest issue of Wired Magazine, the current value of “all the tea in China” is just over 1.8 Billion U.S. dollars. But I digress. Our relationship to God must be judged valuable even if we are: poor, hungry, grieving, and persecuted. Our relationship with God, and in turn with each other, is truly blessed when we hold on to them, whether our needs are met or not.

Why, because God is infinitely valuable, and by his sacrifice on the cross we are infinitely valuable. What matters is God’s evaluation of us, not the world. God’s love and sacrifice gives us dignity, and that by the way is the true definition of blessing. To bless someone is to enhance and uphold their inherent dignity.

Sunday February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
6<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany

Donald Miller describes what he experienced at a checkout line in a grocery store while on a holiday.

*At the checkout counter, the lady in front of me pulled out food stamps (Welfare agencies in the U.S. sometimes use food stamps to help those in need of assistance. They are like coupons). Miller goes on to say, I had never seen food stamps before. They were more colourful than I imagined and looked more like money than stamps. It was obvious as she unfolded the currency that she, I, and the checkout girl were quite uncomfortable with the interaction.*

*I wish there was something I could do. I wished I could pay for the groceries myself, but to do so would have been to cause a greater scene. The checkout girl quickly performed her job, signing and verifying a few documents, then filed the lady through the line.*

*The woman never lifted her head as she organized her bags of groceries and set them into her cart. She walked away from the checkout stand in the sort of stiff movements a person uses when they know they are being watched.*

*On the drive over the mountain that afternoon, I realized that it was not the woman who should be pitied; it was me. Somehow, I had come to believe that because a person is in need, they are candidates for sympathy, not just charity. It was not that I wanted to buy groceries; the government was already doing that. I wanted to buy her dignity. And yet, by judging her, I was the one taking her dignity away. (Blue Like Jazz. Pg.84)*

That's what the world does. It thinks it has the right, and obligation to decide and control who and why someone has dignity. We deceive ourselves into thinking that the more wealth, power or influence we have; the more dignity or blessing we have; which according to Jesus is utter nonsense. Our dignity comes from being God's children. It is God's love, and creation of us, that makes us valuable, and no person can take that away from me.

Just because the disciples were chosen to be Christ's closest associates while he was on earth, does not mean they have any control on who is worthy of God's love or attention. Read on in the Gospel, and we see how, time and time again, Jesus had to remind them of this truth. It was a hard lesson to learn, as the twelve were always putting people in categories, and trying to decide who should or shouldn't meet Jesus.

Now comes the hard part of every sermon and that is this; what does this mean to you and me? Maybe it is obvious to you, but we should remember that these blessings, and curses, were spoken to Jesus' disciples, and not the crowd. They were words meant for his followers, and maybe that is because we are so prone to forget, like the disciples, that none of us, not now or ever, are the arbitrators of who is valuable and who is not.

It is a lesson I know I forget far too often, especially when I work at a charitable event and feel tempted to pity someone who needs help. It is a lesson I forget when I am anxious about what I will eat, or wear, how I will pay the bills, or when I think that if I become financially insolvent my dignity is somehow forfeit. It is a lesson I need to remember when I am tempted to become judge, jury, and executioner when someone I know falls and struggles to get back up.

Sunday February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
6<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany

My dignity, my worth, my blessing: never comes from my own hand. It comes rather from the one who made me, called me and praise be to God; redeemed me. So, it does not matter if you are not perfect, or if you are struggling financially, or are persecuted, or are grieving, because you are blessed; no matter what I or anyone else may tell you. You were born and you live and ultimately you will die with dignity, because God has so ordained it and his word is law and life. Like Jesus said, “So, rejoice! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.” (vs. 23)