

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**  
**Sixth Sunday After Epiphany - February 15, 2004**  
**Anne G. Cohen**

**Luke 6:17-26 \* New Revised Standard Version**

[Jesus] came down with them 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."

**Clip from the "Treasure of the Sierra Madre:"**

"Badges? We don't have no badges. We don't need no stinkin' badges!"

**Occupancy Permit**

I'd like to make an important announcement this morning.

We do NOT have our Occupancy Permit from the City of Simi Valley - YET.

But I'm telling you - that's okay. We don't NEED their "stinkin'"

Occupancy Permit to inhabit GOD'S DOMAIN - the Beloved Community - traditionally known as the Kingdom of God.

We are already occupants of that sacred and blessed PLACE when we live and behave as God intended - with reverence for the Earth, respect and compassion for one another, our neighbors - and strangers. When we live out the values of justice and tolerance, when we do the work of repairing relationships with each other, the planet and God - we are already residents, citizens, members and legal occupants of God's Domain. And we don't need no "stinkin' permits."

Jesus apparently said as much during his sojourn in Galilee a number of years ago. 114 SAYINGS attributed to Jesus were collected in the Gospel of Thomas - found in the Nag Hamadi library - in a jar - in a cliff by

the Nile in Egypt. Four of these sayings indicate that the poor, the persecuted and the hungry already have occupancy permits from God - simply because they ARE poor, persecuted and hungry - not because they are righteous. This flies in the face of the common view that God blesses the righteous with riches and social standing - and curses the immoral with poverty and marginalization.

The writer of the Thomas "Sayings Gospel" has an interesting twist on who the hungry people are. The Jesus Seminar translation reads: "Congratulations to those who go hungry so the stomach of the one in want may be filled." (The Five Gospels p.512, Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, J.S.)

This indicates that some amount of self-sacrifice is expected in Just Human Economics.

The Gospel of Matthew included these four early sayings and added four more for his Sermon on the Mount narrative. Also, in the narrative, he shows Jesus saying these things in the context of actually DOING God's work - healing, teaching, offering hope to the poor, persecuted, sick and hungry. The author of Matthew interprets several of the sayings as SPIRITUAL MANDATES:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God....  
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." [Matthew 5:3,6 - NRSV]

The author of Luke, in his Sermon on the Plain, took the same four sayings in their simpler form and then added four "woes" or "condemnations" - giving his audience the other side of the coin, the negative of the photograph.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God...  
"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."  
[Luke 6:20b,24 - NRSV]

I'd like to share with you two other translations of the same text - so that you can begin to hear the variety of interpretations that have been offered for these sayings that have become core values to many in the Christian tradition.

The Jesus Seminar tries to recreate the style of the original language - in English. It has the effect of evoking feelings and responses in us that may have been evoked or intended in the original audience.

...[Jesus] would look squarely at his disciples and say:  
"Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you.

"Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast.

"Congratulations, you who weep now! You will laugh.

"Congratulations to you when people hate you, and when they ostracize you and denounce you and scorn your name as evil, because of the son of Adam! Rejoice on that day, and jump for joy! Just remember, your compensation is great in heaven. Recall that their ancestors treated the prophets the same way.

"Damn you rich! You already have your consolation.

"Damn you who are well-fed now! You will know hunger.

"Damn you who laugh now! You will learn to weep and grieve.

"Damn you when everybody speaks well of you! Recall that their ancestors treated the phony prophets the same way."

(The Five Gospels p.289-90, Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, J.S.)

The shock value of the words "Congratulations" and "Damn you" - rather than the archaic "Bless-ed" and "Woe to you" - certainly makes ME think differently about the radical changes we are expected to make in our lives if we are to be occupants of God's Domain - here and now.

Eugene Peterson, Presbyterian Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, BC, Canada, has written a translation in contemporary English called The Message. I enjoy his work for much the same reasons as I love Science Fiction. It makes me think outside of my box. Here is HIS take on Luke's Sermon on the Plain:

Then he spoke:

"You're blessed when you've lost it all.

God's kingdom is there for the finding.

"You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.

Then you're ready for the Messianic meal.

"You're blessed when the tears flow freely.

Joy comes with the morning.

"Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me.

What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens - skip like a lamb, if you like! - for even though they don't like it, I do...and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.

"But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made.

What you have is all you'll ever get.

"And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself.

Your SELF will not satisfy you for long.

"And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games.

There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

"There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others,

saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests - look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular." [ p.131, The Message by Eugene H. Peterson]

I must read the next few verses as well - because they are relevant to our discussion and his translation is so accessible:

"...Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst... If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously. Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them!" [Luke 6:27-32, pp.131-32, The Message by Eugene H. Peterson]

I've been in email conversation with members of my Simplicity Group about these sayings and their implications for living an authentic and ethical life. One member wrote:

...the struggle I have knowing how to interpret the extreme nature of some of Jesus' commands is similar to the struggle I have knowing how to interpret or apply the extreme nature of environmental sustainability (they both have to do with how to live as a human in the world). To change my life to live in alignment with what I know about utter sustainability would require the same kind of radical change it would take most (all) of us to make to live utterly by Jesus' teachings.  
[F. Colcord 1/20/04]

Another member responded:

I think that Jesus is doing a couple of key things in the Sermon on the Mount: (1) calling people back to the heart of the law -- the reasons/values behind it -- and to an even more radical following of God's ways (loving God with heart/mind/soul and loving neighbor as self)... and (2) he is turning things "upside down" for his listeners to wake them up to a kingdom living that is often counter-intuitive to the more self-serving and self-protective thinking of society.  
[J. Aylard 1/25/04]

She adds that:

"Heaven" or the "Kingdom" is where God is... where love, truth, justice, etc. reign... like in the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..." [J. Aylard 1/31/04]

One interpretation might be that, in these sayings and prayers, Jesus is

calling us to align our value system to God's and to live out of that value system with as much integrity and consistency as we humanly can - no matter what the risk or cost to ourselves. When we screw up, fall into self-absorption and harm others, we have placed ourselves outside the Door of the Divine Domain. Regret, repentance, forgiveness, love and repair are keys for walking back through the front door and being welcomed at the Messianic Feast.

These sayings were brought home to me repeatedly this week because of the article in the Simi Valley Star a week ago Friday. The local ACLU has been in dialogue with the City for several years regarding the legal status of the cross on McCoy Hill. The article was inaccurate and appeared to be written for shock value. (Jesus and the Gospel writers are not the only ones who know how to use this tool!)

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The reporter revealed that the president of the local ACLU chapter, Stuart Bechman-Besamo, is an atheist, is affiliated with this church and teaches Sunday School. The information could have been interpreted as describing a deep tolerance and willingness to share ideas - on the part of both Stuart and this church.

The people I've been hearing from have taken the flawed article as Gospel truth and have developed a different interpretation (aka spin). Devout Christians in Simi Valley and Moorpark have taken it upon themselves to judge us without knowing us. For having an atheist teacher in our midst, we have been deemed satanic, unchristian, damned, aligned with the Taliban, and, at best, idiots. One woman used my first name repeatedly as if it were a swear word, as if her opinion was a weapon against my personal immorality.

"Count yourself blessed every time someone ... smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable." [ p.131, The Message]

Most callers left no return number confirming that DIALOGUE was not their goal. Most appeared to be more upset about an atheist teaching Sunday School than about the ACLU questioning the legality of the McCoy cross.

This week confirmed several things for me that I've believed for awhile:

- . Religion truly resides in the reptilian part of our brain, not the cerebral cortex.
- . We humans see the world through filters or lenses shaped by our experiences/beliefs/values. The facts are rarely seen in their neutral form. And when someone feels threatened by perceived attacks to their

carefully constructed reality, they practice fight or flight behavior - Christian or not.

. Christians, being human, have yet to actually practice the Christianity that Jesus was describing and practicing.

The words I heard on the lips of Christians this week would have burned a hole in the altar. The judgment, hatred and violence directed toward Stuart and us - from Christian strangers inspires me to name what we do here something other than "Christian" - in order to separate myself from that onslaught: "Compassionists" perhaps - or, "God-Lovers" - or "Pagans considering their Divine and Human Nature" - ANYTHING but "Christians Like Them."

But the impulse to separate is a reptilian brain response to take flight. And it abdicates our responsibility to continue to offer a different interpretation of Jesus' message about how to live TOGETHER - really live TOGETHER - not separately and at war. Apparently, God is okay with being cussed out. So perhaps we need to be okay with that too. It's about them, not about us.

We are called to do this radical thing - of loving perceived enemies (who are usually more afraid than we are), of living AS IF GOD IS ALREADY AMONG US RIGHT NOW. We don't need the City or the scared Christians of this community to PERMIT us to occupy God's House. We're already sitting in the dining room - serving each other at the feast - whenever we STAND AND LOVE in the face of JUDGMENT AND INJUSTICE. And we don't need no "stinkin" occupancy permit.

"You're blessed when you've lost it all.  
God's kingdom is there for the finding." [ p.131, The Message]

The key to the front door is in our Hearts and Hands.

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### **Bulletin**

#### **WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship We Shall Not Be Moved CBS # 30

+ Hymn of Welcome Part of the Family CBS # 46

+ Blessing based on Psalm 1 (unison)

Blessed is the woman who ignores the advice of the wicked,  
who avoids all the ways of sinners,  
who refuses to sit with the scornful.  
She delights instead in the will of God.  
She muses on God's word day and night.  
She is like a tree planted by rivers of water,  
fruitful in season, with unwithered leaves.  
She prospers in everything she does.  
Thanks be to God.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)  
Creator God who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts  
As we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection

One: My soul waits in silence.  
All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.  
Silent Reflection  
The Assurance of Good News (unison)  
Our help comes from God.  
In God we stand firm like trees beside flowing waters.  
Sung Response "Hallelujah. God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

### **WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

Just Peace Moment

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Gospels Luke 6:17-26

Sermon Occupancy Permit

### **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements  
Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal # 743  
Time for Silence  
Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response    In Solitude    Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

May our gifts flow easily from our hands because we accept compassion and sharing as appropriate to the life of faith. May our gifts flow easily from us because we identify with Christ's gracious and supportive ministry to others. May gifts flow easily from us because the Spirit of God desires to heal the world and repair its brokenness through our work, even now, even here. Amen.

+ Hymn of Unity    Walls That Divide    CBS # 48

+ Benediction (unison)

Now may the courage of the early morning's dawning

The strength of the eternal hills

The wide open fields, the silent streams

The beauty of flowered gardens

The love of the family which can bring peace to the world

The life that is Christ

The peace of the evening's ending

And of the midnight

Be with you now and forever more

Amen

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle)

Song from Ghana

+ Postlude

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### **WORSHIP NOTES**

Blessing is from Swallow's Nest: A Feminine Reading of the Psalms by

Marchiene Vroon Rienstra(pp.18-19)

Benediction is by The Rev. Roy Burkhardt, UCC, Columbus, Ohio