



## *“A Level Place”*

Luke 6:17-26; Isaiah 61:1-9

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Last Sunday after the Epiphany

**Prayer:** Loving God, open our ears to hear a word that will draw us closer to you, so that we may be one with you in Jesus Christ. Amen.

I had recently started high school when news was brought to the world of Ethiopia's great famine. I remember seeing pictures on TV of starving women, men, and children reduced to rags, hoping for food at the break of dawn from aid centers, waiting on long lines in the morning cold for their ration. The famine was described as "The worst hell on earth." With only a few drops of water from a single pipe and hunger pangs gnawing at stomachs, children's bellies were distended and millions were reduced to dry skin and bones. Half of the one million Ethiopians who died from starvation were children. Cattle lay dead on barren lands. Wives and husbands sat mourning the death of spouses and children, whom they had laid to rest in a makeshift morgue.

How could something of that magnitude happen? Why did it happen? What in the world happened?

Well, Ethiopia's harvest in the beginning of 1984 was not looking too good. Their economy is based on agriculture. So when the region was faced with hardly any spring rain, and diseases destroyed the crops, the people of the land found themselves in a serious dilemma.

Ethiopia appealed to the international community for aid but many governments were reluctant to get involved because of Ethiopia's political instability which was complicated by years of civil war. A few governments around the world had record harvests the year of the famine, with huge stockpiles of surplus grain, but they were slow to respond. The international community on a whole felt that Ethiopia had not made the famine a priority and should have been able to forecast the drought that would affect its agriculture and prepare for the worst of times. While fingers were being pointed across international lines, millions were dying and a million died. When the international community, the Western world, in particular, finally began to send aid in mass, much of the food delivered was said to have gone to Ethiopian military troops and not to the civilians, the people of the land.

We know that it is not just in Ethiopia that people have gone hungry. There are women, men, children, and livestock starving all over the world and even right now in Haiti and here in the United States.

But in our New Testament lesson of Luke, Jesus makes a prophetic call for justice for the poor. The scripture says,

He came down with them [from a mountain where he was praying] and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people... They had come to hear him and to be healed...; and those who were troubled... 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.’

And then Jesus said in more ways than one, you may not feel blessed because you are poor, hungry, weeping, hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed, but you are blessed. So rejoice and leap for joy because, believe it or not, you belong to the Kingdom of God.

I like that Jesus came down from the high altitude of the mountain and stood on a level place to meet the crowd of disciples where they were at their point of need. I like that he came and dwelt among them to give them the news of their good standing before God.

Blessed are you! What does it mean to be blessed? To be blessed where you are, as you are? To know that the Kingdom of God is yours; that you will be filled and be able to laugh in spite of your social, economic, or physical status.

When I left for Indonesia several days after graduating from Union Theological Seminary last May, I was so excited; excited because I saw the Summer Fellowship I received to study religions in Indonesia an incredible gift that I really needed. The fellowship covered my visa fee, flight, airport taxes, and housing and provided me with a two-month living allowance. I saw it as an opportunity to meet new people; engage and learn another culture; and observe and study how different religious groups live together and interact with each other, in one of the largest Muslim countries in the world. I also saw it as a chance to reflect on the past three years of seminary and frankly, to get some rest and pamper myself. I would not have been able to afford going to Indonesia on my own, right out of seminary, so for me, it was truly a blessing.

I had a long trip ahead; more than 40 hours of traveling which included layovers from New York to South Korea to Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia and finally to Yogyakarta (Yogya), the cultural and educational center of Indonesia where I would live and study. My layover in Jakarta was about 10 to 12 hours for an only one hour flight to Yogya. It was night time and I had decided to rest in one of the hotels at the airport until it was time to leave the next morning. You weren't allowed to stay inside the airport anyway during late night layovers. First I had to pay an airport tax to exit to the baggage claim to get my luggage which unfortunately did not go straight from New York to Yogya. When I reached into my bag for my wallet, which had my driver's license, health insurance card, a credit card, and about 530 plus dollars in cash, I could not find it.

As you can imagine, I panicked and became very distressed. I asked the airline to check the plane which they did, but they did not find it. I had found myself stranded in a foreign land with no money. The airport must have waived the tax. I really don't even recall because I found myself in such a fog. All I remember was sitting on a bench with tears in my eyes, trying to figure out what I was going to do. I decided to ask the airline to take an official report but was told by an airport employee that the office for the airline I came on was now closed. I persisted that they check to see if any airline officers were still around and they were.

Two officers named Christian and Liza filed my report. Then I asked them if they could ask their officers in South Korea to check the gate I went through to see if my wallet was there. They said they would ask. Then they took my contact information where I would be in Yogya, so they could eventually give me an update on my wallet.

Christian and Liza said they would escort me back into the airport where all the airline booths were located. There they said I would be safe. As we began walking, passing the airport hotel where I wanted so desperately to lay my head, Christian and Liza stopped in front of a McDonalds and said, “You’ve been here for a few hours and still have several more hours to go, we are going to buy you something to eat. You must be hungry? What would you like?”

I was hungry but upset that I didn’t have my money to buy my own food, so I told them I wasn’t hungry; that I would be okay. They would not let up about getting me something to eat, and eventually I gave in. They bought me chicken with fries and a large soda, and brought me inside where they assured me I would be safe. Then they told me that at 5am the airline booths would open. They handed me a note and told me to give it to the airline agent. It requested they change my flight and put me on the earliest flight to Yogya. Lastly, they gave me enough money to cover the exit tax at the airport in Yogya. When I met Ingrid, the universities host, at the airport in Yogya and told her what happened, she told me she would provide me with my living allowance immediately. I vowed silently that I was going to enjoy my time in Yogya even though I lost my wallet and then I prayed for the money in my wallet to bless whoever found it. I gave the whole situation to God and decided to let it go. Several days later I received a call from the airline letting me know that they found my wallet at the gate in South Korea with all its contents, less 100 dollars.

The whole experience shouted out “blessed are you.” You were poor, but you have the Kingdom of God; you were hungry, but you got your fill; you were weeping, but now you laugh – and with that I rejoiced and leaped for joy.

The book of Luke is the gospel of the poor. It is concerned with the marginalized and the oppressed. It provides us with a Beatitudes that does not address those who are poor in spirit and those who hunger for righteousness as in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5. It addresses those who are economically poor and not highly regarded because of their social status. It reassures a reversal of their situation; an expectation that their circumstance, not only can or should be different, but will be different.

In the Beatitudes of Luke, Jesus provides pastoral words of comfort and encouragement, a kind of congratulation for those who walk by faith even though they are poor, hungry, weeping, excluded, reviled, and defamed.

Jesus’ pronouncement of blessings in our Luke text is not a requirement for entering God’s Kingdom. The blessings are ours because the Kingdom of God is ours. The pronouncement of woes to the rich is not a condemnation of material wealth, but an urgent call to those who possess a lot to rethink their priorities and evaluate whether they use what they have to serve those in need.

Jesus’ teachings on blessings and woes highlight socio-economic inequities and disrupt conventional assumptions of who is blessed and who belongs to the Kingdom of God. And so Jesus flips the script, evens the playing field, and draws us a picture of a new community in the Kingdom of God where the rich do not have a monopoly on blessings, but where rich and poor are on a level place; where the poor are declared blessed.

In the book of Isaiah, religious practices mean little if not accompanied with compassion and caring for those in need. Two chapters before our Luke text of chapter 4, verses 16-21, Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth reading a slight variation of the first few verses of our Old Testament Lesson of Isaiah 61:

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The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

But then the last few verses of our Isaiah text are filled with compassion and give assurance to the poor:

Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, ...they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

Our texts for today remain true for the people of Ethiopia, Haiti, the United States, and around the world who are poor and hungry. They are on a level place because the Kingdom of God is theirs, and they are blessed. On this Valentine's Day which commemorates love, remember – we are all blessed. That is God's gift of love to us.

Amen

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