

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, C  
Jeremiah 17:5-10  
I Corinthians 15:12-20  
Luke 6:17-26

Melinda J. Wagner  
First Immanuel Lutheran  
Portland, Oregon  
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Nurses and doctors are passionate about healing. Their satisfaction comes from being able to send people home better than before. The early days of Covid-19 starved them of this satisfaction, but things may be starting to shift for these dedicated healers. A respiratory therapist said that in their Salem hospital, they are now seeing more patients live – thanks be to God. She says, “Some people we thought we might lose, they have actually turned around and gotten better. It’s like a little glimmer of hope.” She’s relieved and grateful to help healing happen again. *(Inside an Oregon hospital, here’s what it takes to provide care through the chaos, 2/8/22, npr.org)*

Jesus was passionate about healing, too, beginning with healing bodies and minds. In today’s scripture, Jesus prayed all night on a mountain and came down brimming with God’s healing power. People crowded around, suffering from diseases and unclean spirits, and God’s “power came out from Jesus and healed all of them.” Incredible!

But Jesus wasn’t done yet. Jesus was set on bringing an even farther-reaching kind of healing. Healing not only individuals but healing human society as a whole. So he began to teach.

*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...*

Somebody said that if Jesus had just stopped there, it would have been the most beautiful sermon ever preached. But Jesus did not stop. Jesus went on:

*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.*

Wow. What does Jesus mean by all these “woes”? In other teachings Jesus only bleses people, but here he adds a shocking dimension of warning. This warning can really mess with our view of the world – and maybe even our view of God. But this warning also brings us a fuller understanding of what God wants for the human family.

Jesus' words were even more disturbing in Jesus' day. In that culture, people believed that if you were poor, it was because you deserved to be poor. It meant you had displeased God somehow, you didn't measure up to God's standards. Back then, people would never say "Blessed are the poor" — they believed the poor were cursed.

The truth is, poor people still get judged today. When we see people living on the street, it's often assumed they brought that situation upon themselves through bad choices — but that is never the whole story. We have so many ways of judging and blaming people for their situations. And blaming and judging can be a way of distancing ourselves from the pain. Saying, *I don't have to lose sleep over them!* But Jesus wants us to see it's not about "us and them"— we belong to each other. The pain we see spilling into our streets today is a sign of the human family being wounded. Deep healing is needed.

In Jesus' day, people assumed if you were wealthy, it meant God was smiling on you. You had pleased God, you were being rewarded. They thought the rich deserved to be rich because God had blessed them more.

And this attitude is also alive and well today. People resent the ultra-rich, but our culture actually worships wealth. People with money are idolized. They get the attention. They wield the power. But Jesus names the danger that lies behind that gleaming façade — the danger of trusting in something that deceives. Basing your life on glittery things that can never deliver what they promise.

For the sake of healing, Jesus turns the world's values right on their heads. Where the world curses the poor, Jesus blesses them. And where the world blesses the rich, Jesus brings them down. It's downright shocking — even painful — but so necessary.

Because Jesus is out to heal all of human society — and healing is often *uncomfortable*. A friend of mine has had two hip replacements, and he says it was absolute hell to go through that! But he's glad he did. He needed that "out with the old and in with the new" procedure. He needed that disruptive and deep kind of healing to live the rest of his life in freedom. The human family needs disruptive and deep healing too.

We can't help but flinch when Jesus speaks "woes" against people with privilege, because we know that's us. People in the US are wealthier than most people on the planet. We can't help but realize that "woe to the rich" is directed at us. And we can't help but protest. *How is this fair? Isn't Jesus playing favorites, blessing the poor and rejecting the rich? Doesn't God love us too???*

And here's the thing -- When we work our way around to protesting this way, when we really get our backs up about it, *Jesus has us right where he wants us.* Now Jesus has us

in a place where he can teach us something. When we hear our core values so severely called into question, we just may open up to the new thing Jesus brings – this kin-dom of God which doesn't operate by your rules or by my rules, but by God's rules. This reign of justice that seems impossible to humans, but all things are possible with God.

Does God play favorites? Actually, yes. If we pay close attention to the Bible, we learn that God does play favorites. *God favors those who suffer most.* Because wherever suffering is real, God is there. Wherever people are in need, God is there. God's heart has a special place for people the world abuses.

Gustavo Gutierrez, a theologian from Peru, puts it this way: *God loves all God's children, but it is only natural that God's attention goes first to those who are living in an intolerable situation.*

Every blessing Jesus speaks is meant for people living in an intolerable situation. People who are poor, hungry, weeping... Because God's heart works like the heart of any loving parent, or any caring human being, but multiplied by infinite wisdom. God's heart goes to the hurt places first. And when we realize this is how God's heart works... then we understand how our hearts and minds and hands are meant to work too.

Who is God's kin-dom for? God's kin-dom is for those living in intolerable situations. People who suffer abuse. Who experience chronic pain or illness or addiction. Whose nations are torn by violence. For refugees seeking safety. For those beaten down by racist injustice. For those who can't feed their kids. God's kin-dom is for families living in cars, women sleeping in tents, men curled up in doorways all night. Christ reaches out to give these beloved ones the dignity the world will never give. God lifts them up with love and power and strength. God forgives them and makes them God's own. And, God reaches out with practical help, working through people who have the ability and means and the humble commitment to assist.

God's kin-dom is for people who know they're in trouble – and also for those who don't realize it yet. God's kin-dom is also for all the deluded children of God who worship wealth—because they can never be filled by the riches they seek. God's kin-dom is for the mistaken ones who spend their lives trying to win the world's favor – because they'll never find what they're looking for there. God's kin-dom is for those who live only for themselves -- and end up lonely. Jesus warns all these foolish ones to wake up before they waste what they've been given. Jesus calls them to claim the life that really is life. Freed from greed and selfishness, centered in humility and compassion and justice. Life in the community of mercy and forgiveness and active, practical love.

This is the healing God intends for the human family. For all of us. And we surely need it.

Oxfam reports that during the pandemic, billionaires experienced the biggest surge in wealth since public records have been kept. The world's ten richest men saw their wealth double. Elon Musk became one thousand percent richer! Meanwhile, 99% of the world lost income and 160 million people were pushed into poverty by job losses and shutdowns. One in three people worldwide now experience food insecurity, meaning they can't afford a balanced diet because of income loss and rising prices.

The pandemic was not a great equalizer. Instead it exposed a system that allows some people to become obscenely rich, while others don't have the basic necessities to survive from one day to the next. This kind of inequality is dangerous. People die from it. And when a few elites become too rich and too powerful, they dictate how governments work. (*Oxfam blames the rich for the pandemic plight of the poor. It's a controversial claim.* Npr.org 2/2/2022; *The new faces of pandemic food insecurity: hungry, worried... yet generous.* 9/17/2021 npr special report)

Some people are imagining a different way. I recently learned about a group of 102 ultra-wealthy individuals who call themselves the "Patriotic Millionaires." They are actually protesting the tax laws that allow them to pay less than their fair share. Their refrain is, "Tax the rich, and tax us now." And I don't know if their movement springs from faith commitments or humanitarian concerns or economic analysis or political conviction, but it sounds like it's headed in the direction of healing.

Others approach healing at a more personal and spiritual level. Our forum is working its way through Dr. Randy Woodley's devotional book on "reconnecting with sacred earth." We have daily exercises to help us dwell with nature and notice how all things in creation are connected, how all living things are our relatives. That's a beautiful kind of healing in itself, but there's even more. Because where maybe we had expected to grow closer to the trees and the birds and the soil, we are also discovering a deeper connection to the human family. Living in urban spaces, we are coming to realize that the people living outdoors are actually our neglected relatives. We belong to each other. We are feeling this at a deep level, feeling the wound to humanity. Feeling deeply the need for healing. It's a start. (Randy Woodley, *Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth*)

When Jesus blesses the poor and declares "woe" to the rich, it's not about excluding anyone. Instead it is God bringing the human family together, in hope of releasing all of us from our bondage. God is sweeping all of us up into God's reign of love, this new pathway of justice, which is God's healing for the world. We just keep on learning this way of Jesus, which is always beyond us but is also the path we walk each day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.