

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, C  
Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Psalm 1  
I Corinthians 15:12-20  
Luke 6:17-26

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February 17, 2019

Sometimes Jesus makes us uncomfortable in order to bring us together.

Two weeks ago I attended a community conversation called “Homeless in Portland.” It was held here in NW Portland and was open for anyone to be part of. Even though it was Super Bowl Sunday, the room was packed with about 75 people, filling all the chairs and standing 2-deep around the walls. That shows how big the homeless crisis is, and how eager people are to understand and respond. I’ll admit I went in hope of hearing some answers. But what I took away was much different.

What I experienced was a room full of caring people speaking their truths about a struggle that’s bigger than all of us. Some speakers were homeless themselves. Other speakers had jobs that address needs through mental health care, shelters, police crisis training, homeless villages, or advocacy. Many Northwest neighborhood members expressed their concern and empathy, and a real sense of grief, as well as frustration, that so many vulnerable people do not have a safe place to live.

And one particular theme came up, over and over—the theme of privilege.

Financial privilege was definitely brought up. Homeless people are poor. Poor people can easily become homeless. High rents and low-paying jobs add up to too many people without shelter. Having enough money to get by is a privilege we often don’t recognize, a privilege often passed from generation to generation, but life can be tenuous when you don’t have that safety net.

Racial privilege came up too. When you look at who is homeless in Portland, a high percentage come from racial and ethnic minorities, out of proportion to our population. I was somewhat surprised that most of the invited speakers at this gathering had brown skin. Most of the speakers were African American or Native American or even originally from another country. But really, that was my own racism that made me feel surprised about these speakers. The truth is, I needed to hear what they had to say, these sisters and brothers with darker skin. They made me think in ways that were uncomfortable for a well-off white professional looking for solutions. I might prefer not to really consider how people are kept down by their skin color. But I need to be aware of this. It’s real.

That evening I heard quite a number of people in the room reflecting on their own privilege, saying “Here I have the privilege of having a home... what is my responsibility to help those who do not?” So that in the end this neighborhood gathering wasn’t a policy discussion. In the end, it was a human conversation about a crisis we all own, and we all are called to respond to.

Jesus would not have used the word “privilege” back in his day -- but scripture shows he understood this dynamic very well.

Especially in Luke’s gospel, whenever Jesus sets out to describe the kingdom of God, the reign of mercy and love that God calls us to live... it always includes concern for the poor, the vulnerable, those without privilege. Jesus never gives only “spiritual” good news. It is always practical good news at the same time. Good news so practical it has economic dimensions, which can be threatening. Good news so powerful it disturbs our assumptions and rearranges our priorities.

When Jesus preached his first sermon, he started by naming “the last and the least.”

*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...*

Someone reflected that if Jesus had just stopped there, this 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 Matthew’s version Jesus only blesses people, but here in Luke Jesus adds that shocking dimension of warning. This warning really messes with our view of the world – and perhaps even our view of God. But this warning also brings us a fuller understanding of what God wants for the human family.

If we find these words disturbing today, we should take into account that they were even more disturbing back in Jesus’ day. In his culture, people often believed that if you were poor, it was because you deserved to be poor. You had probably displeased God somehow. At the very least, you had failed to measure up to God’s standards. A person

back then would never say “Blessed are the poor”—it simply didn’t compute. They’d more likely say the poor were cursed.

The truth is, people still judge the poor today. When we see people living on the street, in tents, in parks, people often say 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 other people for their difficult situations. It can be a way of distancing ourselves from the pain.

In Jesus’ day, people assumed that if you were wealthy, it meant God was smiling on you. You had pleased God and been rewarded. In essence, the rich deserved to be rich. God blessed them more.

I can see this attitude lingering today, too. A lot of people may resent the ultra-rich, but our culture certainly honors wealth, even worships it. We respect people with money. We think of them as having “made it,” and we want to “make it” too.

Both then and now, what Jesus does is turn 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, and it is our Lord’s way of showing how God’s reign of justice and love is remaking human relationships.

It’s hard to hear “woes” or warnings spoken against people with privilege, because we know that’s us. Living in the US, we’re wealthier than most people on the planet. We enjoy peace, security, education, so many advantages. We can’t help but feel 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? We protest the same way we protested as children when our sister got a bigger piece of cookie. “Hey, when do I get mine? What’s in this for me?” Only now it’s not a cookie we’re upset about... it’s how we stand in God’s eyes. 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 life values seriously called into question, we just may open up to the new thing Jesus brings – this kingdom of God which does not operate by your rules or by my rules, but by God’s rules.

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

In today's scripture 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 that this is how our hearts and minds and hands are meant to work too.

Who is God's kingdom for? God's kingdom is for those living in intolerable situations. People who suffer abuse. Nations torn by violence. People in chronic pain or illness. God's kingdom is for those harmed by racism. For refugees seeking safety. And yes, for families sleeping in cars, women sleeping in tents, men curled up in doorways all night. In Jesus Christ, God reaches out to give them the dignity the world can never give. God lifts them up with Christ's love and power and strength. God forgives them and makes them God's own. And, God reaches out with practical help, through people who have the power and the humble commitment to assist.

Who else is God's kingdom for? God's kingdom is also for those who worship wealth—but can never be filled by the riches they seek. God's kingdom is also for those who spend their lives trying to win the world's favor – but will never find what they're looking for there. God's kingdom is for those who live for themselves—but only end up lonely that way. In Jesus Christ, God reaches out also to these, to give the dignity the world can never give. God lifts them up with Christ's love and power and strength. God forgives them and makes them God's own. And brings them into a new community of mercy and forgiveness and active, practical love.

When Jesus blesses the poor and says “woe” to the rich, Jesus isn't putting people of privilege somehow outside God's kingdom. Jesus has come for blessing, not for cursing. John 3:16-17 says Jesus came to save the world, not condemn it. Our scripture specifically says Jesus healed “all” the people, everyone who wanted healing. Jesus came to heal our world and heal all of us. Yet on the way to that final healing, we do need to see what Jesus says “no” to... greed, selfishness, careless living... so our “yes” to

God can be all the stronger. So our privilege does not rob us of compassion and humility. So we can be in step with God's reign of compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and inclusive community.

It turns out this scripture is all about Jesus making people uncomfortable in order to bring us together.

Which brings me back to that crowded room in Northwest Portland two Sunday nights ago, where 75 people were willing to become plenty uncomfortable in order to look with courage and compassion at intolerable situation of homeless neighbors. Willing to look at rich and poor, willing to feel with those who are hungry and weeping, willing to speak their truth with open hearts.

I believe it was God's Spirit at work, far outside the walls of any church or synagogue or mosque. Making us uncomfortable. Leading us in God's new way. Thanks be to God.

Amen.