

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH
Sunday February 13, 2022 – 6th Sunday After The Epiphany

WORSHIP FOCUS: “The Wicked and The Good”

Wicked men obey from fear; good men, from love. — Aristotle

1st LESSON: Psalm 1 (VU pg. 724)

Blessed are those who do not follow the counsel of the wicked,
or linger in the way of sinners,
or sit down among those who mock.

But their delight is in the law of God,
and on that law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted beside streams of water,
yielding their fruit in due season.

Their leaves do not wither,
and whatever they produce shall prosper.

As for the wicked, it is not so with them,
but they are like the chaff,
driven away by the wind.

Therefore the wicked shall not be able to stand
when judgement comes,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For God watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way if the wicked will perish.

2nd LESSON: Jeremiah 17:5-10 (NRSV)

Thus says the Lord:

*Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.*

*They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.*

*They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.*

*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.*

*They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.*

*It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.*

*The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?*

*I the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.*

3rd LESSON: Luke 6:17-26 (NRSV)

He 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."

REFLECTION: "Blessed Are You"

When we read the Gospel of Luke from our privileged position as people of the First World, it is common for us to encounter a Jesus in its pages who is a little hard to take. Jesus is harsher in Luke than in any other gospel in his critique of power and prestige. As Westerners reading Luke we can feel uneasy. Indeed, in the Christian West, for many years we tended to try to understand Jesus through the gospel account that was most friendly and easy on those with power and privilege. We put Matthew's account first, and we gave it priority because it was more gentle, more accepting, less threatening, more loving.

For example, in Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus only gives us comfortable blessings. And these blessings are much more general than they are in Luke. They seem to apply to everyone. In Matthew, "Blessed are the *poor in spirit*," for instance, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In Luke, the blessings are much more restricted and limited. "Blessed are you who are *poor*," says Luke, "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."

In Luke, it is the poor and the hungry who will enjoy blessings.

And, if we don't catch on to this, Jesus ends his beatitudes in Luke with the damning words, "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." Jesus is also not speaking in the abstract in Luke. He is not talking about the rich, the full, and the people who are laughing. Jesus is talking about you who are rich, you who are full, and you who are laughing. The rhetoric is more intense, more personal. We hear Jesus' words with discomfort.

In that final woe, we also realize that the you who are laughing now who Jesus addresses, are those who enjoy the good life, are at the top of the social order, and, that those who are weeping now, are not weeping because of a loved one dying, but because they live at the bottom of a social order replete with injustice that kills, marginalizes and humiliates, that makes life a crushing, joyless, daily grind.

All of this, of course, makes Luke the most popular of Gospels in Third World countries, in places where laughter is rare, where children go hungry, and the poverty is extensive.

To speak theologically, it is often said that in the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus articulating what is known as "the preferential option for the poor."

During my time here at Fonthill, as I have met with you and talked with many of you about your faith, you often say things to me which bring up the shadow of Luke and his stern Jesus.

Some of you have told me that you realize that you don't quite need God in the same way as someone who is struggling to make ends meet. Some of you have told me that for the most part, you have the resources to look after yourselves most of the time, and that, in truth, your faith is the constant realization of how blessed you are, and how you might live out your sense of being blessed and pay it forward.

Others are not quite as comfortable with this idea. I hear some of you struggle with this concept of the preferential option for the poor, and insist that, "God treats everyone the same," or "In the eyes of God, everyone is equal."

Certainly, if we are talking about God's love for each of us, I agree. God loves each of us as a parent loves a child. But, if we start trying to say that God treats everyone the same and gives everyone the same opportunities, and it is people's own fault if they do not enjoy the same blessings that we do, I think we miss the point of Jesus' difficult Good news.

Just as some of our children have special needs, or struggles, or challenges, and need to be accommodated, and given extra special care, and outward signs of support and compassion, so too do some of God's children. There are places in this world where people hunger, and thirst, and weep, where the promise that God is with them is so very, very important and so very much more needed than in other places. And for those who are blessed, realizing how blessed we are, in comparison to so many others, should be a humbling experience, a call to action.

Indeed, if, as some theologians do, we push Luke's beatitudes to their logical conclusion, there is a threat implied in the woes. The rich – us – will have our day of reckoning unless we help rectify this imbalance, and seek ways in our lives not to perpetuate and make this imbalance worse. When this comeuppance occurs we come to recognize the limits to our wealth, and maybe even have a reversal of fortune. Indeed, we may come to know hunger, stop being quite so smug, and mourn and weep.

I would argue that when we stop understanding our privilege, and using it responsibly, that we risk arriving at a tipping point, in which "the centre can no longer hold, and things start to fall apart," and that it is when things start to fall apart that our comeuppance ensues.

When we in the West, start to think that we deserve our privilege, our happiness, our comfort and easy living, and confuse it with what God owes us because God loves us, and start to demonize every little thing that makes us uncomfortable, or makes our lives a little inconvenient, we cease to count our blessings, we cease to have the ability to see the world clearly for what it is, and enjoy the healthy perspective that Jesus – especially the Jesus we meet in Luke – would like us to have.

Yes, God loves us. But really folks, does Jesus care about how inconvenient it is for us to have to wear masks, and socially distance, and show proof of vaccination before we go to a restaurant? Doesn't God care more about all those places in the world where vaccines are not available, where there is no healthcare, where people live so close together that social distancing is impossible, where vaccine passports and regulations do not even exist and cannot exist, where masks are a luxury few can afford, where the infrastructure of the society, due to war or poverty, precludes any medical intervention whatsoever? Where most children don't go to school online or in person, because – well – there are no schools?

We who are privileged can often become so self-involved and narrow-minded that all we can conceive of is our comfort, and every little discomfort. We can become that princess in the Grimms fairy tale, sleeping on a pile of mattresses, in the lap of luxury, tossing and turning all night because of a tiny pea tucked away beneath the bottom mattress.

We can fixate on the pea.

Trust me, if we fixate on our tiny discomforts, we risk becoming so fragile that our society will implode. If we confuse the sources of our small discomforts with evil, then evil will be allowed to walk freely amongst us and our world will become a crazy free-for-all.

I think that this is what is happening a little bit right now.

No one wants to get a vaccine. The experience is not pleasant. It comes with some risk. But listening and paying attention to Facebook echo chambers saying that vaccines are evil, and then responding to our sense of discomfort by making everything else more uncomfortable – well, "*Woe to you who are laughing now as you honk your horns for a freedom you confuse with well-being, for you will mourn and weep.*"

Likewise, when we decide to vilify people who have a right to demonstrate simply because it is inconvenient, and start saying in our hearts that the tanks should be brought in, and that the protesters should be removed by any means possible, we risk experiencing precisely the same woe, “*Woe to you who are laughing now, as you confuse your sense of well-being with freedom, and call the police and your members of parliament, and write letters and up the ante, for you will mourn and weep.*”

Our country needs to take a deep breath. We need to pray. We need to try to reset ourselves, and understand our current situation as being uncomfortable, and yet, essentially good. And in our silence and prayer, we need to regain a healthy sense of perspective.

I think Jesus and scripture can help us do this.

Psalm One talks precisely of this need to meditate and deliberate.

Blessed are those who do not follow the counsel of the wicked, or linger in the way of sinners, or sit down among those who mock. But their delight is in the law of God, and on that law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted beside streams of water, yielding their fruit in due season. Their leaves do not wither, and whatever they produce shall prosper.

And the prophet Jeremiah reminds us, that “Our emotions can betray us, and delude us, they can easily lead us astray. But God will not.” Even though God may not always have the easy answer, God’s love can redirect us. “In testing our minds and searching our hearts, helping us understand our ways and the fruits of our doings.”

Oh Canada, we are blessed.

Oh Canada, how can we not know we are blessed?

Oh Canada, how can we remember our blessings before we are overcome by woe?