

Lectionary 6 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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February 13, 2022

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Some people have noticed that Easter comes late this year. Because of that, Lent comes later. And so our scripture readings linger a bit longer in the early parts of Jesus' ministry. So we get some stuff that may be less familiar to you because it comes up less frequently. And so it is that today we have the beginning of Luke's intriguing presentation of what we call the Sermon on the Plain. Its much-better known sibling is the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is in Matthew. It takes place on a mountain top. The Sermon on the Plain is in Luke. It obviously takes place on what Luke calls a level place. The Sermon on the Mountain is three full chapters. The Sermon on the Plain is less than one chapter. The Sermon on the Mount is addressed only to the twelve disciples. The Sermon on the Plain is addressed to a huge and diverse crowd of people. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes, *Blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the merciful*, etc. The Sermon on the Plain begins with beatitudes AND woes, blessings AND warnings. Blessed are you who are poor. Woe to you who are rich. Blessings and warnings.

"Woe to you who are rich." That should concern each and every one of us. Because the poorest person in our congregation still has much more food and more economic security than the twelve disciples or the crowds that are gathered around Jesus in today's gospel. This should concern you, if not alarm you. Because this is Jesus, according to Luke. And he is saying something harsh to those of us who have material comforts. *Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full now*. This should make you uncomfortable. It should make you uncomfortable, and you should think about it.

When you go off to a seminary school, which is what my grandmother would have called it, you are required to study the New Testament in its original language, Greek. And at least in my editions of the Greek New Testament, the title of each gospel begins with *katà*. According to. It doesn't the gospel; it says "According to Matthew, According to Mark." *katà Loukân*. According to Luke. If you pay close attention to my sermons, then you may have observed that I am scrupulous about who is doing the writing. Who is telling the story. The Bible did not fall out of the sky. It was inspired by the Holy Spirit, is our doctrine, but it was written by a variety of people in a variety of tongues with a variety of voices and perspectives. *katà Loukân*. According to Luke. Luke is extraordinarily attuned to poverty and wealth. I'm going to elaborate on that, and give you four examples. The *Magnificat*, the Song of Mary, which is the foundation for our

sending song at the end of worship today: the Song of Mary speaks of reversals of wealth and poverty. *He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.* The Song of the Virgin Mary. It comes to us from Luke, and Luke alone.

John the Baptist appears in all the gospels, but only in Luke does John preach that we must share. *“He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”* According to Luke. John the Baptist preaches that reversing income inequality is a fruit worthy of repentance, an advent preparation for the coming Messiah.

On September 25 of this year, we will still be in the Gospel According to Luke, and we will hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus goes to heaven. The rich man goes to hell. It’s a parable of Jesus, a parable that only exists in the Gospel According to Luke.

And in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke’s sequel to the Gospel, Luke tells how the early Christians shared everything in common. But two people lied, a husband and wife. They lied and withheld some of their wealth, and in Acts chapter five they are struck dead by divine intervention right in front of Peter. Their names are Ananias and Sapphira.

Mary’s song. The preaching of John the Baptist. The parable of Lazarus. The judgment of death upon Ananias and Sapphira. These are stories that are unique to Luke. Today’s Sermon on the Plain is Luke’s variation on the Sermon on the Mount. And Luke’s version contains these woes, in addition to the beatitudes. So Luke clearly has his eye on wealth and poverty. And in his writings, the wealthy end up dead or in hell as a result of their wealth. Or at the very least, sent away empty, as the young Virgin Mary puts it.

Luke and Acts are the two largest books of the New Testament, and constitute slightly over one quarter of our New Testament, making Luke the New Testament writer who wrote more of the New Testament’s words than anyone else, including Paul, even though Paul has a large number of much smaller writings that bear his name. Luke’s version of events has been very influential. Even Christmas Eve is Luke’s event. A story of a child born in great poverty in what is basically a barnyard. Visited by shepherds—smelly, disreputable peasants. There isn’t a wealthy person in sight. What about the *Magi*?, someone asks. Opening up their treasures chests of gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Ah, yes. *According to Matthew.* Not according Luke. It only proves my point.

So if I am wealthy by the standards of the New Testament, how do I live my life? Is the only option the way of Saint Francis of Assisi? To give away everything as soon as it comes into my hands? That might be a safe and honorable option. I mentioned that Luke is extremely influential on our understanding of Jesus. Luke wrote more, and he wrote better, or at least more memorably. But his voice is not the only one. Certainly Matthew and John carry enormous weight. And it would be a huge mistake to leave out Paul. Paul did not say terrible things about wealthy people. He was always too busy asking for money! That’s funny, but it’s true. He had a

particular mission. And so did Luke. Not everybody does the same work of the Lord in the same way.

I mentioned that on September 25 we will hear the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The week before, on September 18, we will hear another parable that is only found in Luke. Another parable about wealth. And it may be the weirdest parable of all, and it is often called the “Parable of the Dishonest Manager.” It’s weird and very hard to preach about. The parable praises the guy who commits fraud. Jesus concludes by saying, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.” I think he’s saying to use your money, if you have it, to help others. That’s consistent with the story of Zacchaeus, the “wee little man” of many famous Sunday School lessons, who was a corrupt tax collector, and decided to give some— but not all— of his wealth to help others. Zacchaeus is another one of those vivid Bible stories that we owe exclusively to Luke’s Gospel. And the second-most beloved parable in the Bible— the parable of the Good Samaritan— is also exclusive to Luke, and is also a story of someone using their money to help someone in trouble.

According to Luke, Jesus says, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” He doesn’t say, “Woe to you who are rich, for you will surely burn in hell.” He says you have received your consolation. The spiritual danger of wealth is that we will be comfortable. So comfortable that we believe our own lies. And I think Luke at least pokes a hole in the illusion. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Our help and our hope is never in our wealth. For me, personally, Luke certainly makes my comfort less comfortable. And that may not be enough. But it’s a start.

I’ve been reading a commentator on the Gospel According to Luke, and his perspective is that the God of Luke is a merciful and persistent God. A God who sends messengers called prophets. And the messengers are usually ignored, or sometimes persecuted or even killed. But God’s mercy is that he keeps sending messengers. The stubborn hearts of humankind are addressed by a merciful God who is persistent and tenacious. According to his commentator, for Luke, Jesus is the highest and greatest prophet who comes proclaiming God’s mercy. But Jesus is preceded by all of the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist. And Jesus is succeeded by his followers, apostles who continue to proclaim God’s mercy to a hard-hearted world. So God is the same God in the Old Testament, and in Jesus Christ, and in the church that was founded by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. God is consistently merciful. God is persistently merciful. And you and I are part of that mission of mercy. And that is the meaning of verse 23 in today’s gospel: *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.* Jesus is stating that by our work in proclaiming God’s mission of mercy to a hard-hearted world, we will encounter great difficulties. But we should rejoice because we are engaging in the work of the prophets of old, and in the work of the life-saving cross. All of it the work of a God who is consistently and persistently merciful. So woe to me and my wealth, if I base my security and my consolation on my wealth. May I hear that message and absorb it. May you hear it and absorb it. But if we fail— when we fail— God’s mercy will come back tomorrow and knock on the door again. And again. And again. Amen.