

Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Psalm 1  
1 Corinthians 15:12-20  
Luke 6:17-26

Epiphany 6C  
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The Rev. Karen Haig

### Our Only Option

One of the things I love best about being your priest is being entrusted with with your sacred stories.

Sometimes your stories are filled with joy and blessing. Sometimes they are filled with heartache and woe. Both are the truth of how life is. Sometimes things are wonderful... and sometimes they really aren't. And sometimes, when we reflect on things that seem pretty awful, we find that our stories of great difficulty and even tragedy are often enveloped in compassion, hope and great love.

Last week I sat with someone who lost her husband awhile back. It was long enough ago that his absence isn't always the primary topic of conversation, but not so long ago that his absence isn't always a presence. In the course of what was something of a planning meeting my friend began to talk about her new-found ability to ask people to volunteer, to participate, to join in. It seems that when her husband died, she was surrounded by people who came just to be with her, to love her, to listen to her stories and to help keep loneliness at bay. She spoke of how comforting her St Barnabas friends and neighborhood neighbors had been, and how willing they were to just be with her whether she needed to laugh or cry or just sit.

And as she began to heal, as life began to hold hope and promise again, she was surprised to find herself doing the very thing her friends and neighbors had done for her. When her neighbor received a devastating cancer diagnosis, she didn't wonder whether or not she'd be intruding, didn't worry about not having the right words to say, didn't stop herself before she even got started. She just went to be with her neighbor. "I never would have done that before" she told me. "But after experiencing all that love and support and caring after my husband died, I realized that knowing just what to say or worrying about just how to be wasn't at all what mattered. What mattered was just showing up to be with her."

I remember being a chaplain in San Francisco and having that same sort of experience. When I began my chaplaincy, the director asked me which hospital departments I was most and least comfortable with. Lovely, I thought. This is a pastoral program and that is such a lovely pastoral response to me. Most comfortable? Being with moms and new babies. Least comfortable? The terror of the urgent and unknown in the Emergency Room. Excellent, said the director. Please report to the Emergency Room.

Needless to say, I was terrified. I wasn't afraid of the blood or the mess or the chaos. It was the raw emotion and the potential for utter devastation that happens in the ER I thought I couldn't handle. And I was right. I couldn't handle all that. As it turns out, all those fears, all those terrors, all those devastations are not things that are meant to be handled. Of course, every emergency room visit doesn't end in unspeakable sadness and loss, but lots of them do. And unspeakable sadness and loss

aren't things mere mortals are supposed to "handle." What we can do, is to be truly present in the midst of all those big emotions. What we can do, is to help hold them. What we can do, is to grieve and cry and pray and lovingly attend to the people who have been devastated. We can be with them. We can BE with them.

That's what stands out to me the most in today's gospel. Being with. I imagine you recognize the gospel passage we heard from Luke today. It's not as familiar as Matthew's version of the beatitudes when Jesus is high up on the mountain, not down low with the lowly people. Luke's beatitudes are a lot more stark and spare and don't have some of the really nice spiritual stuff like blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth or blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. What Luke's beatitudes DO have is woes to correspond with his four short blessings.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.  
But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.  
But woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.  
But woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.  
You get the drift.

We're still in the early events of Jesus' ministry in Luke's gospel. We didn't get to hear last Sunday's story of Jesus calling Peter as his first disciple, but it's really different from the other gospels too. In Luke, when Jesus calls Peter they've already been together for a while. Peter already has a taste of the kingdom Jesus proclaims and Peter goes, knowing something of the reality that his entire world will change even though he does not know how. Luke is different from the other gospel writers and he is very, very serious about the cost of discipleship, not just for Peter but for us too. Sometimes I wonder about what I would have done if I had encountered Jesus some 2000 years ago. Would the person I am have fallen in love with the gritty, scary, boundary-crossing, rule breaking Jesus the way I have fallen in love with the Jesus I know from this distance? Would I have followed?

Luke knows that Jesus has a "preferential option for the poor." His is the gospel of the poor, the sick, the hungry, the marginalized. Luke's gospel, more than any other, insists that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth are to work for justice by upending the structures that maintain the vast chasm between the rich and the poor, the hungry and the full, the ones who appear to be blessed and the ones who really are. This dramatically different world Jesus proclaims as the Kingdom of Heaven, is not the world Luke lived in and it isn't our world either. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed is not a place where some people have plenty and some have not nearly enough. Do we really understand that? Can we really take that in? In God's kingdom, roles really are reversed. The great paradox, the great reversal is truly what matters for Luke. In his gospel, the first really are last and the last really are first.

The poor, hungry, bereft and marginalized people Jesus was talking to that day didn't have many options. They didn't have fancy dinners, beautiful houses, important jobs or impressive titles. They had

God's promises, that's what they had. They had a Savior who spoke of them as beloved and blessed, that's what they had. For most of us, it's only when something goes terribly wrong, that we imagine God to be our only option. When there is a horrible diagnosis, then we turn to God. When the stock market crashes, then we turn to God. When our partner is unfaithful, then we turn to God. But for Jesus' listeners that really was their only option. It's the only option still, for so very many.

It wasn't God's will that those people were poor or sad or hungry or destitute. It wasn't God's will then and it isn't God's will now that in a world rich with enough food for everyone to be filled, so many still go hungry. It is our will, not God's will that people are poor and hungry and in great need. God's will is for justice and mercy and peace. It is our will that keeps justice and mercy and peace from coming to bear. It is our will that keeps God's kingdom from coming. I was stunned to recognize that! I certainly don't want people to starve or be homeless or not cared for and I know you don't either. But God works through us, and where things are wrong, we are the ones who must work to get things right. Thy kingdom come, O God, thy will be done.

As it turns out, the ones who are willing to sacrifice so that God's kingdom actually can come, that God's will actually will be done... those are the ones Jesus would call blessed. Luke's beatitudes are probably not as well known as Matthew's because they really aren't very pretty. Matthew's beatitudes are easier to swallow, as it were. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Not the poor. The poor in spirit. Well, that can be all of us and probably is. Blessed are the ones who hunger for righteousness. Well, that can be all of us too, at least some of the time. Blessed are the meek, the merciful... I'm pretty sure we all have at least a desire to be merciful, even if we don't really want to be meek. But Luke is explicit in his understanding of Jesus as the one who is always on the side of the outcast and marginalized. Not the side of the ones who are usually trying to be good.

Christianity has long been criticized, and rightly so, for perpetuating the notion that God's blessings consist of health and wealth and if you have those things you're blessed and if you don't, you're not. "I'm so blessed!" is the cry of many who have what they want and attribute their good fortune to God's favor rather than to their own privilege. This "prosperity gospel" has millions of followers in America. Everyone from Pentecostal healers to the power of positive thinkers to old school revivalists to that smiling preacher who has 7 million TV followers, have those followers because the message they hear is that God wants to bless them health and wealth. Who wouldn't want that? The only problem is, that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says the cost of discipleship is high. The cost of justice for all is sacrifice by many. The cost of the Kingdom is being with the ones who are cold and hungry and marginalized.

The prophet Jeremiah said it so well... Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and blessed are those who trust in the Lord. The woes of Luke's beatitudes are not curses, but they are warnings about things that get in the way of our understanding of who we are and what we were made for. We were made for love. We were made for relationship. We were made to be with each other. It is our relationship to God that identifies us and gives us value, not our relationship to our things or our status or even our good works.

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles 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...  
Jesus came down. To be with them. Amen.