

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
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Lectionary Year C: Luke 6:17-26

Imagine yourself with virtually unlimited wealth. You have everything anyone could possibly want, and you can do anything anyone could possibly do. The world is at your fingertips and, while you have to put in your fair share of work to keep the life you have, that effort is well worth it when you consider all the luxuries you're able to enjoy. You can travel the world, dine on the finest food, and stay in five-star hotels. As you recline on the beach in the sunny tropics, you very understandably say to yourself, "This is the life..."

But then, you wake up one morning to discover that it's all gone.

Or imagine yourself in the most perfect relationship with a spouse. You have dozens of common interests, your personalities compliment each other splendidly, and you see beauty in this person inside and out. Over the years, you share in many rites of passage -- perhaps the proposal to marry, the purchase of a first home, or the birth of a child. You build up a vast treasury of memories and you look forward to seeing this person every day so you can make even more memories. You couldn't possibly imagine how you'd live without this person in your life.

But then, you wake up one morning to discover that he or she is gone.

Or imagine yourself as a popular and much-beloved person in your community. You have the respect and admiration of virtually everyone. Doors open for you wherever you go because the community trusts you with everything from money to politics and anything in between. You can get a loan without a credit check and a job without a background check, because it's widely known that you're about as close to perfect as any human could possibly be. For as long as you can remember, no one has ever said anything bad about you either to your face or behind your back.

But then, you wake up one morning to discover that everybody hates you.

In the first example, I had you consider losing the fortune that made your life worth living. In the second example, I had you consider losing the spouse who made your life worth living. And in the third example, I had you consider losing the popularity that made your life worth living. But what brought about these devastating losses? That really isn't relevant, I think, because how you ended up in such dire straits wouldn't affect how you felt. Whatever the case may have been, you'd invariably feel awful.

So, you're either poor, sad, or hated, and maybe not for any good reason. But, in an effort to find some solace, you open up the Scriptures, and you fall upon the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

You've lost your fortune, and you read the words, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20).

Or you've lost your loved one, and you read the words, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:21).

Or you've gone from being the most popular person in the community to the most unpopular person in the community, and you read the words, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man" (Luke 6:22).

What capacity will you have to understand what Jesus says here? How could you possibly consider yourself "blessed" in these circumstances? Let's look at what Jesus says in his follow-up; he says, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven..." (Luke 6:23a). Now, does this soften the blow a little bit? I suppose that the promise of something better in the life to come might make your current crappy circumstances more bearable. But whatever your circumstances may be, you're probably not the intended audience for Jesus' proclamation in this case. Jesus is more likely talking to people who've endured long-term poverty, hunger, sadness, and oppression.

You'll notice how quickly the tables turn as Jesus continues to speak; look how he says, "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" (Luke 6:24-26).

What if you fell upon these words after losing your fortune, your spouse, or your good reputation in the community? Would you be able to see yourself as "blessed" then?

The Gospel of Luke is known for favoring the poor over the rich, the sad over the satisfied, and the oppressed over the privileged. Commentators have noted that the community from which Luke's Gospel emerged was a poor community, which explains the slant or bias one might find in it. But who, then, is Jesus? Is he, as we read in Luke's Gospel, an ancient equivalent to a modern-day social justice warrior? The riskiest of enterprises -- may I point out -- is the projection of present social and political realities onto a person who has been dead for nearly two thousand years (albeit living in heaven). The world in which Jesus lived his earthly life is much different from the world we inhabit now.

The only things that remain for us from Luke's Gospel are the blessings and the warnings. We need to examine our situations carefully and determine for ourselves how this text applies to us. As individuals, I believe that, with sufficient honesty, we can name our wealth and poverty, our blessings and curses, and our standing in the community whether good or bad. Then we can live our lives in such a way that neither wealth nor poverty, neither blessing nor curse, and neither praise nor ridicule shall consume us. As an example, wealth is not necessarily bad and poverty

isn't necessarily good. Warnings against wealth apply more directly to those who ignore or exploit the poor...not to all wealthy people in general.

And if you are poor, sad, or oppressed (and regardless of why you may be), the hope that Jesus proclaims need not be some faraway blessedness in the next life; it may, indeed, come to you thanks to God's work in and through those who take Jesus call to serve seriously. It may come in a "hand up," in an opportunity to restore your life and health, or in a profound offering of God's grace to you.

For the rest of us, may we be assured that we are not forever stuck in the patterns of our greed, arrogance, and pride. Jesus shows us an alternative to this in his service to the poor, suffering, and oppressed. The warnings he gives are, perhaps, intended to make us care a little more about those whom we might unintentionally ignore. But we can be the bringers of grace and love and hope to those who cry out to us, and from that we may be blessed as we are a blessing to them.

Jesus knows we're not perfect, so he gives us another chance. He forgives our sins of greed, arrogance, and pride and thereby frees us to serve those whose cries we would otherwise ignore. Imagine being given the grace to give of yourself without expectation of reward, and imagine waking up every morning and always finding it there.

Now, imagine no more, because this is reality when Jesus is with  
you.

Amen.