

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

OUR GOD IS A BIASED GOD (AND AREN'T YOU GLAD?)

Luke 6:17-26

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

17He 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. 18They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. 20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 22Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23Rejoice 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. 24But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. 26Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

DIAGNOSIS: Bias that Destroys

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Biased Living*

Much as we hate to admit it, we humans live biased lives. Given our druthers, we'd much prefer to associate with the successful, the powerful, the trend-setters-the "fat cats" of the world. We even assume that merely associating with such up-and-comers will lift us up a notch or two. We feel important and vindicated when we're praised by them. Yet our bias triggers an adverse behavior in us as well, namely, a bias against the down-and-outers. After all, what benefit or fun can there be in mingling with the poor, the downtrodden, or those gravely bowed down by grief and affliction? No, better to shun them and set our sights up, at the people with leverage who can bring us up a level or two.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Biased Hearts*

This bias stems from our assumption that being at a high socio/economic/success level will magically guarantee that all-elusive and ever-sought-after quality called "happiness" (blessedness). This error in thinking leads to yet another error: We conclude -wrongly-that God is biased in the same way we humans are, namely, that God is impressed with the high-and-mighty too and, in fact, that being high-and-mighty is what being blessed by God is all about! We assume -wrongly-that when the fat cats praise us, thus giving their stamp of approval to our existence, God likewise gives his stamp of approval, His blessings.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *God's Leveling Bias*

Luke underscores that we couldn't be more wrong! God is biased all right, but (surprise!) God is biased toward the down-and-outs and against the high-and-mighty! In this Sermon on the Plain (I suggest it is highly appropriate that Luke uses the word "level" to describe the place that Jesus delivers this sermon from), Jesus levels with his disciples. He tells them

(us) that God favors the poor, the hungry, the grievers, the oppressed, and judges the rich, the well-fed, the happy, those spoken-well-of. But in fact, Luke has already introduced this motif at the beginning of the Gospel with Mary's Magnificat. She saw, in the Incarnation, God bringing the powerful down from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53) Thus, for Luke, the arrival of Jesus is God's leveling work in full force. The lowly are raised, the high-and-mighty completely leveled – as in cast out! The tables are turned, with the high-and-mighty becoming the “lowly of God.”

PROGNOSIS: The Bias that Saves

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Jesus, the Great Leveler*

For Luke, Jesus is the great leveler. Why, just by hanging around him, people's fortunes are reversed! Luke describes power as simply radiating from him, curing sickness and casting out evil spirits (v. 19). What about the high-and-mighty who are now the “lowly of God”? Again, Luke writes, God's mercy is astonishing. Even they can be recipients of God's mercy (Luke 6:32-36). That's because God has a special love (a bias) for the unfortunate—even those who have become unfortunate because of His own judgment. Luke stresses that God will go to any length to salvage unfortunates. In fact, we know that the length to which God does go is finally Golgotha and the cross.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Hearts Reversed*

For Luke, hanging around Jesus not only produces a change of fortune, it also produces a change of heart. Like the process of osmosis, God's bias (for the unfortunate) seeps into and begins to take over biased hearts. We realize that to be “blessed” by God does not have anything to do with the “happiness” resulting from the accumulation of wealth, success, and prestige. Rather,

to be blessed by God is to have God on one's side, to be counted as one of His treasured children.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Unbiased Living*

Luke, always concerned to show that the Church imitates Jesus, shows just what this Christ-like life looks like in Acts 2. Thus, just as Jesus is especially concerned for the oppressed and unfortunate, so too is the Church. (The Church being composed of those who have been twice-leveled by God). A reversal in living habits is the result. Rather than seeking out the high-and-mighty and shunning the down-and-outs, we (the Church) do the opposite, acknowledging that God's leveling work is now being continued in and through us!