

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

POWER FOR THE POWERLESS

Luke 6:17-26

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Analysis by Norb Kabelitz

17 Jesus came down with the twelve 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. 18 They had come to hear him and be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And 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. 21 Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 22 Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 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. 24 But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25 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. 26 Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

DIAGNOSIS: Lip Service for the Powerless

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Superficial Commitment*

Who can dispute what Jesus said? Don't we incorporate his words in a liturgical cry, "Remember the poor?" Don't we sing Mary's Magnificat and faithfully preach Luke's version of blessings and woes. With empathetic sermonizing don't we make the case for helping the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the forlorn, the losers, and persecuted? We make eloquent mission statements that proclaim the use of the "words and works of Christ" as a role model to reach out in the community to meet physical needs and demonstrate kindness to all the people of God. But for most of our congregations the poor are not in our membership. The poor are sent to seek out social service agencies who in turn seek church support. These charities also "comfort us" by keeping the poor out of our sight. So how can they hear "good news" from us when they are not among us?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Discrimination*

While we are a church of "Word and Sacrament" where the promise of justification by faith is assured, how is it that Christian "host volunteers" serve the regular meal but sit apart from the poor when the Sacrament is celebrated with them (see Thursday Theology #438, Nov. 2, 2006)? What hinders our identification with the poor, the hungry, the dispossessed, the persecuted, and defamed? Are we afraid of being infected by their problems? Most of our congregations do not include many (even if some) of the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, the homeless. Where is the faith that sees Christ in the poor, the hungry and the homeless and will sit with and among them? Or is that just pious talk?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Words of Woe*

Is our attitude that of the rich (v. 24) who stoop down condescendingly to help the poor? Is this the attitude that gets

judged with “woe”? President Eisenhower said, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every missile fired represents a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, from those who are naked and are not clothed.” Will the poor, the hungry, the bereaved and reviled be our jury? They have their spokesman in Christ who pronounces a woe on the rich, the full, the frivolous, the respected and admired! Does Christ’s woe suggest a threatening reversal in some after-life? If so why? After all, the poor, the powerless, the persecuted are not among those who can help pay the bills that maintain the institutional life of the church—salaries, utilities, and property insurance. While we give lip service and sermons on behalf of the poor, the sick, the persecuted, and the defamed—the maintenance and management of church properties, pastoral and synod ministries, get the lion’s share of resources. How do we reconcile this disparity? Will God judge us for it? And who will be nailed to account for the difference?

PROGNOSIS: Empowering the Powerless

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (External Solution) : *“Power Came out from Him” (v. 19)*

Luke tells us that Jesus came down from high places to stand on a “level place” with the crowds of his disciples and others who came from all around. This geography suggests the mantra: “Level with us, Jesus!” While “crossings” (connecting the gospel with one’s everyday life) are usually horizontal like a bridge over troubled waters, Jesus’ crossing here is both vertical (coming down from God) and horizontal: “He came down for us and our salvation” (Nicene Creed) and made possible horizontal benefits in the shape of the Cross. Salvation means not only “rescue” but also “salve,” a healing power (v. 18). While we may be hesitant to touch and be in personal contact with the hungry, the poor, the sick, the persecuted, the defamed, for fear of contamination, of having their problems rub off on us, Jesus is

touched (v. 19) but his saving power rubs off on them and us! Jesus who was “rich” for our sake became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich (2 Cor. 8)! You could say Jesus became a “banker for the poor.” (See the fascinating story of “Banker for the Poor” in “Christian Century Magazine,” Nov. 14, 2006, involving the recent Nobel Peace Prize winner). In what ways can we identify with the wretched of the earth and, together with them, seek to touch Jesus from whom power comes? By his coming Christ not only addressed the social issues of poverty and hunger, the grieving and forlorn, the deformed and defamed, but all of us as sinners. This lection is not an attack on the rich because they are rich, but because they have no heart for the poor (even so, see Luke 18:27). By his coming down, and nailing our sins to the cross, he has somehow reconciled accounts where we did not and could not. And Good Friday and Easter are the final drama from which power continues to come from him for us all.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Power of Blessing Makes Us Believers on the Level*

Word and Sacrament, rightly preached and administered provide the justification of all by grace through faith. They connect us to Christ’s Word and works not simply as a model but as our change agent. We are able to bring change in the world when the world inside us, (our own attitudes about people and things), change. The question now is, Will we join with and identify the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the excluded, and the persecuted crowd as partners in this redeeming work? Both “Word and Sacrament” are graceful and powerful gifts and change agents toward this end. Hearing and receiving Christ’s Word and Sacrament empowers the faith that creates an inclusive healing and redemptive community. By Word and Sacrament we become participants in Christ “who lived a life of manna for all and mercy for all” (Manna and Mercy, Dan Erlander). Faith becomes

participation, not merely lip service to ideals.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Blessed to Be a Blessing*

We are invited by faith to delight in God's way and be "watered" (see Psalm 1:3 from today's lectionary) by the streams of God's kind of life. Revived and refreshed we are delighted. The good news is not only for the poor or the sick or the persecuted, but for us ALL. When Christ's power goes out, we become both recipients and givers of the same! (Two hymns come to mind: LBW #429 "Where Cross the Crowded Way of Life" and LBW #430 "Where Restless Crowds are Thronging". Check them out!) As to having people speak well of us (v, 26), Gardner C. Taylor suggests that a preacher should "not want to be known as a great preacher. You do want to strive for people to feel—when you have tried to preach—what a great gospel it is" ("Christian Century Magazine," Oct 17, 2006, p. 16).