

Title: "Jesus' Upside Down Mission and Message"

Text: Luke 6:17-26

Turn with me to the Gospel of Luke today, chapter 6.

We are "re-introducing Jesus" this Fall:

-getting to know Jesus again through the eyes of the New Testament writers who knew him best.

Three weeks ago, we highlighted a hymn of the early church that was sung in praise of Jesus.

-This "Jesus Hymn" introduces us to a Jesus, "*who though in very nature God, did not consider equality something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking on the nature of a servant.*"

In the subsequent weeks we have seen how the content of that Jesus Hymn was lived out in Jesus' birth,

-and at his baptism and in the temptation in the wilderness.

Today, let's see how this hymn was lived out as Jesus began his ministry of preaching and teaching.

Listen as I read from Luke 6:17-26.

"Blessed are you who are poor,

-blessed are you who are hungry,

-blessed are you who are weeping and sorrowful,

-blessed are you who are hated, excluded, insulted, and rejected."

And "woe to you who are rich and comfortable.

-woe to you who are well fed and happy,

-woe to you who are well liked by others, and spoken well of by others! Woe to you."

What's wrong with this picture?

-It's all upside down and backwards, isn't it?

-The poor, hungry, grief stricken and insulted people are blessed,

-and the happy, healthy, wealthy people are woefully in trouble.

Now, of course, most of us have heard the words of the Beatitudes many times before,
-and so we aren't so surprised by them any more.
-But Luke's version always sounds a little more raw and un-tamed than Matthew's version,
-and can still wake us up a little on a Sunday morning.

All those "woes" on happy and healthy people are still a little startling.
-The words of Jesus here really do sound backwards.

But maybe they remind us that He who was in very nature God,...He who had it all, was supremely happy and healthy and powerful and influential,
-he gave it all up to be born among us, and to take on the nature of a servant....and become lowly...and die on a cross.

Today, I'd like to re-introduce us to the teachings of this Jesus,
-and refresh our memory, that this Jesus actually liked to preach backwards kinds of things, as well as live them.
-Hence, the Beatitudes: blessed are the poor, and mournful, and meek, and downtrodden.
-Woe to the happy and healthy and wealthy...really?!

And both Luke and Matthew also tell us that Jesus taught these kinds of things to crowds of people outdoors.
-Matthew says on a hillside, and Luke says on a level place.
-But it's not that one is right and the other wrong,
-Jesus was always preaching and teaching these things wherever he was, and it was usually outdoors.
-By the lake, or on the hillside, or in a field, or wherever.

What we are meant to notice, is that He was not sitting in a synagogue behind closed doors with a Torah scrolls all around him, like every other Rabbi people knew.

And he was not limiting his teaching to a small group of the very best Hebrew boys from his local area.

Most of you know this was not at all typical of a Jewish Rabbi.
-Rabbis did not go out and mingle with the "hoi polloi".

-And they did not go out and choose disciples for themselves from the crowd, and they did not teach women.

No. The way it worked was:

- if a young Hebrew boy showed superior intellect and an ability to memorize Scripture and understand its application,
 - he would be selected to continue his study with the local Rabbi in an area.
- All the other boys who had only regular aptitude for Torah studies as they grew up,
 - they would stay home and be an apprentice to their father in whatever occupation he had.

Only the best of the best students would go on in their studies,

- and if they were really good, they would be sent away to study with the best of Rabbis in Jerusalem.

But this isn't the way that Jesus worked at all, was it?

- He went out to the people and taught them all.
- Including women, and children, and the sick, and the poor, and the downtrodden, and the outcast.

And when he picked certain ones to be his closest disciples, he didn't pick,

- he didn't go to the synagogue to find the best students of the Torah he could find.

-No. He went to the lake and got himself some fishermen.

-And later he went and got a tax collector, and a zealot, and some other blue collar kinds of guys.

And he also allowed a variety of women to tag along with them, and he taught them, too.

-It was an extremely unconventional group of disciples for a rabbi in Jesus' day.

-It was what you might call a backwards sort of following.

-So when we come here to Luke chapter 6,

- maybe it shouldn't be such a surprise that Jesus' first lengthy teaching is about the backwards nature of the Kingdom of God.

Let's look at these beatitudes and woes for a minute.

1. First, it was backwards that Jesus should give the blessings first.

The Rabbis of old had always said, "Keep the laws of Moses and you will live.

- Do justice and love mercy and God will bless you.
- Act righteously and you will be rewarded."

And that makes perfect sense to us, doesn't it?

-That's the way we were always taught at home and in school too.

- Our parents say, "Eat your dinner and then you get dessert."
- Our teachers say, "Study hard and do your homework and then you'll get the "A."
- Our bosses say, "Accomplish this project and then you'll get the raise."

But not Jesus, you see? With Jesus it's all backwards.

- You get the blessings first.
- He begins his first real teaching about the Kingdom of God
 - not with the laws to obey, and the rules to follow,
 - but with the blessings to receive.

Before he ever gives an instruction on how to live,

- before a singly admonition, or exhortation, or command,
- Jesus gives blessing after blessing.

He pronounces God's blessing upon these people standing before him,

- before they have ever done anything to deserve it.

And it's not that Jesus naively or idealistically thinks that all these people are wonderful and deserve God's blessing.

- No. Luke tells us that Jesus saw that these people were full of diseases, unclean spirits, and all manner of ills.

But instead of giving them some "self help" instructions, or a new set of morals to live by,

- and then saying, "Blessed will you be if you follow my instructions."

No. Jesus starts right out with the blessings!

And he pronounces them on this rag-tag bunch of people,
-hungry people, excluded people, insulted low life people.

My friends, there's not an "achiever" in the whole lot of them.

-And Jesus blesses them!

-He pronounces God's favor upon them.

-He gives them the dessert before they've eaten their peas.

-He tells them they passed the test before they've even taken it.

-He tells them they've been promoted from the scum of the earth to the children of the King,

-and for no good reason any of them can think of.

You see how backwards Jesus is in his ways of doing things.

-But my friends, as Isaiah said in our earlier reading,

-it's because God's ways are not our ways.

In the Kingdom of God, God's favor precedes all our endeavors.

In the Kingdom, all of our attempts to live under God, and be godly people,

-are not attempts to earn God's favor,

-but are simply responses TO God's favor.

The favor comes first, ...at the beginning.

-We love God because He first loved us.

-We accept and forgive our brothers and sisters

because we have been accepted and forgiven by God.

Our service to God is a response of gratitude,

-because Jesus came into the world to serve and to save us.

-And now, AS HE HAS DONE FOR US,

-we are to do for one another.

The blessings come first, and they are pronounced upon undeserving, under achieving, poor, hungry, grieving, sinful people, who are full of unclean spirits.

-And the only reason they are blessed at all,

-is because Jesus, the King of the Kingdom, is standing right in front of them,

-and is ready to give them more than just a verbal Blessing.

-He is ready to fill the hungry, heal the sick, comfort the
grieving, cast out the unclean spirits,
-and invite these people into the Kingdom where the
blessings will continue to flow.
-He's about to really bless their socks off, undeserving or not.

Then he'll call them to follow him and walk in his ways.
-The order is all backwards, but there you have it.

2. Now secondly, let's take a look at the "woes" that
are pronounced here as well.

Woe to those who feel they have no need of God's blessings.
-Woe to those who are rich already,
-and have no need of God's help.
-Woe to those who are well fed already,
-and have no need of God's provision.
-Woe to those who are happy and healthy and have no need
to ask, seek, or knock on heaven's door for anything more.

Woe to them, Jesus says, because they have achieved their
own blessings,
-and feel they have no need of me or the Kingdom of God
over which I reign as King.
-They are quite content in their own little kingdom.

And you see, it's not that Jesus wishes woe and calamity on
any of these people personally.
-It's not that Jesus pronounces a curse on anyone who
would dare have a good job, or a nice house, or enough
food to eat.

But Jesus knows that those who have it all and have earned it
all themselves,
-often have little room left in their souls for God.
He knows that those who are empty, hungry, and excluded
-have a great desire for the blessings of God.
-And they have plenty of room in their empty souls to
accommodate those blessings.

So Jesus pronounces his blessings on the empty ones.
-He doesn't ask them to clean up their act first.

- He doesn't ask them to follow some self help plan.
- He doesn't tell them what is expected of a disciple,
and then watch to see if they measure up before he
welcomes them into his following.

No. He gives them the dessert first.

- He pronounces his blessings on them.
- He tells them the kingdom of God is open for business and
ready to welcome all who want to enter.
- He welcomes them in as a free gift of grace.

I know this is all backwards. And it may be confusing to us.

- But Jesus is like that.
 - With him the first are last, and the last are first.
 - With him the greatest are least, and the least greatest.
 - With him the blessings come first and then we get to live in
grateful response to them.

But my friends, this is the Jesus the Gospels introduce us to.

- So what are we supposed to do with that?
 - Well, I'd say, receive God's blessing today yourself!
- Come to the table now and receive the gift of God given us in
Jesus Christ, His Son.
- As Isaiah said it earlier,
 - "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters,
-and you who have no money, come, buy and eat.
Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not real bread,
-and your labor on what does not really satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
-and your soul will delight in the richest of fare."

My friends, come and eat today, the bread of the Kingdom.

- And then as you have been blessed, go forth to live in
God's favor, and be a blessing to others.
- It's the only proper response to the upside down ways of
God.

Let us pray.