



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

To Love and To Serve

February 17, 2019

Text: Luke 6: 17-26

He 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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. ‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. ‘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.

Sermon: This was not the easiest of weeks. There was a sudden, unexpected trip. There were departures from my home in Stockbridge and the home of my parents in Madison, Wisconsin, both well before the sun came up. There were long lines at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport, and the traffic in Boston reminded me how happy I am to live here in the Berkshires. Then, of course, there was the difficult reason that I went home. I was going back to a moment that transcended our family—a situation that had gotten beyond my stepmother’s ability to cope and my dad’s ability to help or my sisters’ ability to cheer them on. So I went back home to be with them—simply to offer my presence and be in the midst of pain and hurt that is not going away anytime soon. I went simply to look into my stepmother’s eyes, for she is hanging on with not much more than the thinnest of threads. My role was not to fix any of it, because I couldn’t but simply to be there—to be with—to shop and cook and feed and to love—to remind parents and siblings that we are all in this together. Together we will see it through, no matter what the path unfolds.

While I was in the grocery store, gathering up things I would need to make risotto, chili, lasagna, and chicken cutlets, (you know, the kind of health food that brings comfort and strength), I noticed jumping out at me from their wine section a bottle of Pinot Noir that seemed perfect for the occasion. It was simply called, *Storyteller*. What better way to be in the midst of loved ones than to simply reach back and lean on stories! And so on the first night, as the snow continued to fall and as the wind howled in Madison, Wisconsin, we gathered around a table made out of planks from my grandparent’s barn and our exhaustion

melted away to fellowship, over bites of chicken cutlets—the one we went with first. We faced the hard truth of the times we were living in.

Maybe it was because of the name of the wine, or the contents of the bottle, but I think more it was because of the contents of our lives—the realness of uncertainty, that even the doctors couldn't predict the outcome, and the seeming parade of setbacks, and yet there was the real possibility that comes through love of God and family—that occurred around that table as we suddenly became storytellers. Looking back, we explored how we had experienced this thing called life, how we made it through, and how we counted on somehow making it through one more time. What was fascinating was that while the moments we recalled were often the same—the big moments in our lives we agreed on—what they meant changed with the storyteller. Each person grabbed on to a different piece of truth from that encounter and that contributed to the wholeness of the meaning. Maybe it was the wine, but I think it was more the time in which each of us, rather than correcting each other—simply allowed those various conflicting versions of the story to live all at once because there was truth in each telling.

Storytelling is what our Gospels—at heart—try to do. They proclaim the *Gospel*, which means the Good News, which we understand to be how this world changes through the manifest coming of Christ. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if all four of them—Matthew, Mark, John and Luke—had been able to gather around a table on a snowy night and in the midst of the realness of their lives, munched on some chicken cutlets and drank a bottle of wine. That would be a night to listen and learn, for you see, each of those Gospels proclaim the same story but in profoundly different ways. Each of them carries a nugget of the truth, even if the details don't quite line up.

For both Matthew and for Luke—this story that you heard this morning—is the centerpiece of the introduction to who Jesus is and why he matters. They present Jesus as a teacher, as a sermon-giver; they tell the story of a hurting people flocking to Jesus to listen—but how they each tell the story is so different, that one would need a long sip of any beverage before figuring out how to respond. For Matthew, Jesus climbs to the top of the mountain to deliver the Beatitudes—the Sermon on the Mount. For Luke, Jesus comes down off of that mountain where he was praying to stand on a level place with the people—side by side—the Sermon on the Plain. If Matthew and Luke were to keep telling you the story, they would differ on Christ in many ways. Matthew puts Jesus on a mountain in Galilee to give his disciples his last charge, while Luke has him appearing in a locked room in Jerusalem. On that mountain, Jesus gives the great commission; for Luke, it is through the breaking of the bread that the disciples' hearts are set on fire. For Luke was a Gentile—one who comes to faith later in life, and Jesus is always the *amazing one*—the forgiving one, the one who offers life not just in some mystical, mythical, far-off kingdom but here and now, and one who places before us nothing short of lofty demands. These demands find holiness—not just in our individual living but in the way we build and create a sense of community—in shared abundance, in shared food, love and purpose.

Carolyn Sharp reminds us that the prophets—whose voices of God that those hurting people on the plains knew by heart—were both the voice of God and the conscience of the people. The prophets demanded nothing less than perfection. To be with a prophet was not to be with someone who would kindly pat you on the back and say, “Nice try.” They called the people; they called us—to live into the fullness of not just what God offers but of what God *demand*s

of us. The prophets were demanding and unyielding; Jeremiah was perhaps the most demanding of all. And Patty talked about how people who place their trust in God are like trees planted by water whose roots go way down and are sustained through hard and difficult times. But Jeremiah didn't stop there. He said that those who put their faith in themselves or in humanity—those who turn away from God—are like bushes planted in the desert. They topple over when all is said and done.

You see, the prophets are never easy. In this passage, Luke says you should be like the prophets—not those who go out there and call for an easy life but those who, like Jeremiah, say you better get it right. We better get it right. While the prophets spoke for God, they always stood with the people. If you come to the Lenten study about Isaiah, you will learn about a man who prophesied the downfall of the kingdom of Israel and yet stood by the people every moment, holding their hands, trying to forge the kind of community that Jesus is preaching about here. Such prophets shared their lot with the people; they walked with the people; they offered companionship on this journey of life and told stories, calling the people into a better way of life. They dwelt among them. Does that phrase ring a bell? Surely, we're not that far from Christmas that you've forgotten this whole idea of "dwelling among them," for that is the Gospel—God dwells among us in Christ. And here in Luke, Christ does not stay on his lofty mountain perch; he comes down to be with the people—among people who are sick and broken, tired and breaking—but people who have not given up even if they're holding on by the thinnest of threads.

Those people are pressing in to try to touch Jesus because just to touch him would be to be made whole. So here Jesus is trying to teach his disciples while thousands are pressing in on each side. Jesus says, "Look out there. Look at these people who are hungry, who are sick or broken, who are ridiculed and who are cast out. Your place is right here with them—in the midst of them." After all, Luke remembers Jesus as the one who would demand everything from us—the one who came to share our lot and then the one who gives us everything.

The people on the plain were a bedraggled group; they were worn down but not broken. They had nowhere else to turn but they had not given up; they were clamoring on the plain to be in the presence of Christ. They ached for the Good News. So they came to find him. I hope and pray; I trust that that is why we are here too—to be able to come face to face with Christ and not only receive his blessings and gifts but be able in the safety of this place to receive the challenge. Now, there are many who would read Matthew or Luke and say that the sermon tells us how we as individuals are called to live. In the Sermon on the Mount many consider it as a call to righteousness; I am not one of those people. That's because what I think that Jesus is doing here in words is a very small piece compared to what he does with his life, his teaching, his giving, his obedience, his sacrifice, and yes, his death and resurrection.

What Jesus is demanding of us here is to open our hearts and minds to follow in the Gospel truth, which is the way Jesus lived. While both of these passages may be about calling ourselves to live better lives individually, I believe that fundamentally it's demanding us to live a better one collectively. Looking out across the crowd, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." Unlike Matthew, he does not say, the "poor in spirit." He actually means those who are down and out—the destitute—those who have nothing. Jesus is not saying they're blessed for there is some great reward that will make up for it all, for that is not Jesus' Gospel. Jesus' Gospel is about the future, but also about right now.

Jesus maintains that the poor are blessed because they have no other safety net to turn to. There are no earthly, worldly things to put your trust in—only in God and in your neighbor too. Woes to the rich, Jesus said, which can be hard to hear in a place like Berkshire County, but those woes are not some scare tactic to try to get us to shape up if we want to get into heaven; but rather a reminder that wherever our treasure is, there our heart goes too. And there is not the fullness of God; the fullness of God lies in being part of the beloved community.

Where the kingdom of God dwells is where goodness and relationship dwell; make no mistake about it. The Good News here—the Gospel message—is that Jesus calls us to is to wade into the middle of it all and take our stand with the poor. Yes, give our money away, but even more—become part of that beloved community—a place where poverty yields possibility as we challenge both the individual causes and the systemic causes that result in a place where the rich have so much, and the poor have nothing, for the Kingdom of God is no prosperity Gospel. It is not about material wealth but rather an envisioning of us sharing each other’s lots, remembering the stories of our past, the real hard truth of our present and yes, the hope of our future.

I will not share the fullness of what happened during my time in Wisconsin. But I will tell you what I saw. I saw someone smile for the first time in weeks, simply because someone they weren’t expecting walked through the door. I saw someone who was facing horrors in life delight in the fact that my sister and I were putting together a colorful corner in the corner of the room. I saw my dad stay up past 8 o’clock because for the first time in months, he wanted to. I saw hope rekindled in my sister, who was exhausted.

The Good News is great for all of the people who are suffering but also for the rest of us, even if it’s totally demanding for it reminds us that what we are called to do is to share the common lot with neighbor and Christ too. We are called; no, we are *demand*ed to do what Jesus did—to get in the midst of the people and to give everything we have. We must come down from any mountain, whether high and holy, or made from our own human hierarchies—to simply bless the tumultuous crowds—bless them with our words, our stories, and our teaching—but also with our choice to join together in common lot with real and hurting people—with the actual hungry and poor of the land. To speak of things that challenge the rest of society in the name of Christ, even if it subjects us to ridicule and scorn from those who seemingly know better. But beyond all of that—it is to allow ourselves to be pressed in and jostled from all sides, to be broken and breaking but to never give in.

Amen

The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor