6th Sunday after Epiphany (L6C), February 16, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 6:17-26 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I think it does not need to be said to folks here this morning or tuning in online that there are different versions of Christianity floating around out in the world that paint very different pictures of who God is and what God wants and expects from us. As a student of history, and particularly of church history, I can assure you that that has always been the case, from the very beginning of the church. One of the earliest conflicts in the church was about who could be included in the church, and what requirements there were for that. Some argued that since Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise made to a particular group of people – the descendants of Abraham and Sarah – that anyone who wanted to benefit from what Jesus had done needed to first become a member of that people and obey the laws God gave them. This was a practical approach that preserved the traditions of God's chosen people and honored the difficulties that they had been through over the centuries. The other approach was championed by Paul and also Peter, although there was some tension between the two, as revealed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. This approach insisted that what had happened in Jesus was not about getting back to the good old days of the way Israel used to relate to God. Because if you look closely at the story of God's people, that way had not worked out well for them. Jesus was instead about giving us a radically new way of relating to God and also one another, a way that was inclusive of all the people of the earth, and a way that inextricably connected our relationship with God to our relationship with one another as fellow human beings.

This idea is also fully present in the Gospels – all of the Gospels, but particularly the Gospel according to Luke. Since we began the year of Luke back in Advent, you've heard me say repeatedly that the early chapters of Luke establish a theme of "turning the world upside down," of refocusing our attention away from the powerful and the wealthy and all of our other conventional notions of goodness and success, and towards the outcast, the poor, and the other people and conditions we normally regard as unfortunate or shameful. What we learn in those early chapters is that God does not operate the way we operate, that God does not relate to us as we tend to relate to one another. God is not transactional in the way we are, returning favors for favors, and retribution for offenses. God surprisingly, even maybe *offensively*, seeks out those looked down on by "respectable" folks, people who know that they "fall short of the glory of God," to use Paul's words in Romans 3, and reaches out even to the worst sorts of people with mercy, forgiveness, and healing. This way of God revealed and embodied in Jesus is so counter-intuitive, so hard to grasp, much less accept, that it is no wonder that we continually resist it, and try to find ways to remake Christianity in our image, so that we don't have to face the scary and uncertain prospect of having to change our ways and our attitudes.

This "turning the world upside down" theme finds particularly forceful expression in today's Gospel reading, which is Luke's version of the Beatitudes, found in Luke's equivalent to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It includes many of the same teachings, but with a couple of important differences in emphasis. First, in Matthew's Beatitudes, Jesus is – for the most part – talking to the disciples up on the mountain about the crowds down there below. But in Luke, Jesus is speaking directly to the whole crowd, and all of them are called disciples. The second difference is that Luke includes not only blessings, but also "woes." When we put these two differences together and think about what Jesus' words here mean for us, there is no escaping that all of this, blessings and woes together, should be applied to those who think of themselves as modern day disciples of Jesus.

Now it would be very tempting at this point to turn our attention to those other versions of Christianity out there that I mentioned a few minutes ago, particularly those that want to make Jesus into a champion for returning to the good old days, the days (they think) of law and order, at least for the right sorts of people, the days when people were decent and God-fearing, the days when the line between good and evil was clear, and we were always the ones on the good side. It's very tempting to go that way, and you can see that I'm itching to ramp things up here and let loose on what I consider to be a clear misuse of the Christian faith.

But the thing is, that would be its own evasion of Jesus' teaching, particularly as it continues in the rest of this chapter, where Jesus asks pointedly, "how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?" Jesus doesn't say you can never be critical of others. But he recognizes that our criticisms are often self-serving and selective. So the place to start is recognizing first how these blessings and woes apply to us. Because the fact is, that we are, all of us, caught up in a system that distorts our values and priorities. So that when we hear Jesus say, "blessed are you who are poor," we don't hear that being poor might actually be honorable instead of shameful. We're just glad to hear that Jesus cares for the poor. Because most of us are not poor, and we feel at least a little guilty about that. So maybe Jesus will take care of the poor so we don't have to. Likewise, when we hear "woe to you who are rich," we don't think that applies to us because none of us, I dare say, thinks that we're rich. Never mind what global statistics have to say about that. And maybe God will take care of those rich people too. Never mind that all of us, rich and poor alike, would love to have a fatter bank account, because we trust in money and what money buy.

So what Jesus is saying here, to both rich and poor, is that our trust is misplaced. Riches do indeed have their own kind of consolation, and the lure of that is leading us all astray. Christianity that takes Jesus seriously precisely here in his blessings and the woes will continually challenge our conventional attitudes and allegiances. It flies in the face of our common sense. Who can do it? Even the original disciples asked this desperate question when Jesus told them that getting a rich person into the Kingdom of God was like trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle.

Any version of Christianity that lives comfortably with our usual, practical, and sensible ways of living in this world, that refuses to challenge our fundamental allegiances to power, wealth, and status is missing what God is up to in Jesus. And that applies equally to those who actually possess power, wealth, and status, and to those who don't who but aspire to them.

Being faithful to our calling to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, then, means first recognizing our complicity in the way the world works, acknowledging that we have "turned from God and give ourselves into the power of sin," as we confessed earlier, and that Jesus means to free us from that seductive power. That freedom from sin, death, and evil accomplished in Jesus' death and resurrection give us a new start, with opened hearts and adjusted attitudes, so that we find ourselves caring for those whom God cares for, especially those who most *need* caring for – the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, those who are the victims of circumstance, yes, but also those reaping the consequences of their own bad decisions. But the gospel of Jesus Christ also opens our hearts to our enemies and our oppressors, not to aid and abet them in their evil, but to confront them as fellow sinners in need of the mercy and grace that they would deny others. That gospel message is radical and disruptive. If we dare to proclaim it and live it out, it will get us hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed. Jesus practically guarantees that. And he knows whereof he speaks, because he endured it for us and for our salvation. For that we rejoice, even and especially in troubled times, confident that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto genuine and abundant life now and unto life everlasting in the age to come. Amen.