

Spring Lake Presbyterian Church
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1. Luke 6:20-31

²⁰Then 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. 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. 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.

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Faith of Our Fathers and Mothers

Over the past couple of weeks, I have been leading a Bible Study over at the Groves of Victoria Park and we have been focusing on “Older Adult Spirituality.” We have had some wonderful conversations about our faith and the way that it changes over time, the way that it has grown and developed to the point that we find ourselves not necessarily wanting to die in this moment, but excited, nonetheless, about seeing God face to face. I particularly liked the exercise the study recommended for us this past week. Participants were asked to draw or to imagine a time line. At the beginning of the line was birth. At the end of the line was death. Then, each of us was to mark big events on our timeline – both religious events and non-religious events – until we made a “dot” at “today.” Since none of us has any clue how close we ourselves are to death we could make the dot as close to or as far away from that end mark as we cared to do. Then, we were asked to draw a “basket” from today until our death. (show visual). Inside the “basket” we were asked to write our wishes, hopes, and dreams for the future of our lives.

Together we talked about what was inside of our baskets. Several people mentioned that they wanted to live upright lives honoring Christ in all that they do, and, I believe they are to be commended for desiring that their end-of-life faith continue to grow, to blossom, until that blessed reunion with the One who holds us in Life and in Death. But I was especially impressed by the statement of one particular woman. She stated: “I don’t want to be remembered as the woman in church whose faith allowed her to do great things. I don’t want to be remembered as the woman in church who had visions and prophesied. I want to be remembered as the woman who loved others.”

I was impressed with this woman’s response because it was in no way self-centered. She wasn’t wanting to add to her basket jewels for her very own eternal crown. Even asking to be in that number

when the Saints go marching in was less important to her than simply wanting to increase the love she could give away before she died.

In the Gospel of Luke today, we read about Jesus as he blesses the living. But look at those whom he blesses: *“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.* Jesus blesses those who seemingly have nothing to put into their basket: they are poor; they are hungry; they are weeping; they are hated and despised. Rarely in situations of poverty, hunger, mourning, and hatred does one begin to think of blessings, especially heavenly blessings! Rather, in difficult situations we are focused only on our raw emotions and physical weaknesses. But, even without the transformation into wealth, food, laughter, and acceptance, Jesus names the blessing. And what is that? We can turn away from our own needs and experience the Love from God who is the Source of help and strength. And in so doing, we have something to share. We are able to show God’s love to others.

I have frequently heard it said that when we have reached the pit of despair, the only way we can look is up. And while it is cliché and often petty to say (especially when we are not the ones who are suffering), it is typically true that we seek God in turmoil more often than in times of joy. Listen to those who Jesus curses: *“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.”* Jesus curses those who believe they have all of the answers in the here and now. Jesus curses those who believe that personal satisfaction is enough.

We who live in this land of abundance know what it is to forget those who have less than we do. Our children have more than they know what to do with. Our homeowners keep seeking bigger and bigger places to live, larger and larger storehouses for stuff. Our grocery stores carry multiple brands of every item, enticing us not with filling our bodies but with consuming more and more and more. And when our bellies are full, we forget from whence the abundance has come.

There is a cycle of life whereby we are all rich and poor, hungry and full, weeping and laughing, hated and loved. And though each of these conditions will be experienced differently depending on the circumstances of our lives, God reminds us that at no time in our lives does the spotlight stay on us. God reminds us that we must turn our focus to others, for therein is the reward in heaven.

When we who are rich can help those who are poor, we are offering them the Love of God just as it was offered to us. When we who are full can help those who are hungry, we are offering them the Love of God just as it was offered to us. When we who are laughing can help those who mourn, we are offering them the Love of God just as it was offered to us. And when we who are accepted can help those who are hated, we are offering them the Love of God just as it was offered to us.

The heavenly reward for which we all strive is right in front of us – it is the love of God which we can show to so many others. Jesus gives us the ultimate command to Love: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,*²⁸ *bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*²⁹ *If anyone strikes you*

on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰*Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.* ³¹*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

When we love others, we are allowing God to get between us – to form the bridge from me to you, from “us” to “them.” And so, when we love our enemies, when we do good to those who hate or even despise us, when we bless those who adamantly curse us, when we pray for those who abuse us, when we give generously to those who steal from us, when we do to others as we wish they HAD done to us, we no longer think of ourselves, of our own pain and suffering, but rather of how we can make a bridge of love, how we can invite God’s light to enter into those vast caverns of darkness.

Our world is full of such caverns – caverns of hatred where terror and power and the need for revenge demolish peace, caverns of sorrow where tears and weeping choke back any desire to live, caverns of poverty and hunger where the mentality of scarcity prevents any attempt at generosity; but our world is also full of the light of love which can shine the beauty of God’s abundant blessing of Love into such darkness.

As we remember the faith of our Mothers and Fathers who have gone before us, the faith of our sisters and brothers and friends and neighbors, I want to ask us what we are putting in our end-of-life baskets. On All Saints Day we remember not the “treasures” that were left for us by those who have died nor even the way they stored up “heavenly treasures” for themselves. On All Saints Day we remember the Love of God that was passed on to us through the Faith of our Mothers and Fathers, Sisters and Brothers, Friends and Neighbors. We remember them not for the spiritual giants that they were while on the earth but for the fact that they loved others.

Their example to us is one that can teach us that true stewardship is not about making ourselves into the most upright Christians the world has ever seen, but that true stewardship is always about others – about loving others, about generously sharing with others, about sacrificing one’s own life for others while on earth. Their example to us is one that can teach us that when we are truly alive and thriving we are not focusing on the scarcity of today – the poverty, the hunger, the tears, the hatred, but we are focusing on the abundance of God’s love that exceeds time. Their example to us is one that can teach us that to be alive and to thrive involves allowing our roots to grow deep into the soil of God’s abundance, allowing our leaves to reach high into the sunshine of God’s love, and, in the midst of praising God as we grow, leaving seeds of love for future generations. Amen.