

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

*Rev. Ross Smillie*

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## **Beyond Division**

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. – Luke 6:20-26*

Nearly twelve years ago, Therese and I made a visit to Guatemala. On the plane flight from Miami to Guatemala City, I sat next to a well-dressed Guatemalan man who traveled back and forth between Guatemala and Miami often on business. As we talked, I mentioned that we would be going up into the mountains among the impoverished Mayan Indians. He explained to me, as he sipped his drink, that the Mayans were lazy and that that was why they were so poor.

I thought about that conversation over the next few weeks, as we visited Mayan villages, tramping up steep hillsides to see their irrigation projects, admire their hand built roads and the corn they grew on the mountainside. I kept watch for signs of laziness, but I met men who got up before dawn each morning to walk six or more miles to their steep mountainside fields, spent all day doing hard physical labour and then walked back to their homes at night. They didn't seem lazy to me. The women, when they weren't weaving their homemade clothes, or carrying enormous bundles of produce on their heads as they walked miles to the nearest market, were making tortillas and working in the fields, and looking after children. They didn't seem lazy to me either. Even the children were usually working. Five and six year olds were often carrying younger siblings on their backs. They didn't seem lazy to me.

In fact, looking back on the two weeks I spent in that country, the closest thing to laziness (aside from myself) that I saw was that well-groomed man sipping his drink on the airplane. And it wasn't physical laziness that I saw in him – he probably worked hard in his own way – what I saw in him was mental and spiritual laziness, an unwillingness to challenge the racist assumptions that conveniently allowed him to blame the Mayans for their own poverty and oppression.

In fact the reasons why the Mayan Indians of Guatemala are poor has nothing to do with laziness and everything to do with power and access to resources. They

are poor because the vast majority of the fertile, flat land is controlled by a few wealthy families and corporations which grow produce for export and the Mayans are forced to eke out an existence on steep mountainsides with marginal soil. They are poor because there is only so much land to go around and if they were to get more land and better land, it would have to come from those who have much more than they really need. They are poor because to talk about land reform or social progress will get you labeled a communist, which is often a death sentence. They are poor because when they try to organize to improve their situation, their leaders have been kidnapped, tortured and murdered. They are poor, in short, because the wealthy and powerful are not willing to surrender their wealth and their power in order to create a more just and equitable society.

But to admit that would have required my well-groomed fellow passenger to confront some difficult truths. It is much easier to believe that the Mayans deserve to be poor than it is to admit the real reasons they are poor. It is a very lazy attitude for those who are comfortable to blame the victim.

I think of these things because I have been trying to understand what Luke's Sermon on the Plain is all about. Most of us are more familiar with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, where Jesus promises blessings for a variety of people but there is no mention of woes for anyone. But in Luke's gospel, Jesus promises blessings for the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are hated, and pronounces woes on the rich, the satisfied, the happy and the respectable.

The strange thing is that this is exactly the opposite of the way that we usually think. We think of the rich, the satisfied, and the content as blessed. We think of woes falling on the poor and the hungry. When I first came back from Guatemala, and told stories about what I had seen and heard there, a typical reaction was "We are so blessed to live in Canada!" Not according to Jesus!

If we were to ask ourselves who is blessed, who is successful, who is fortunate in our world, we wouldn't come up with the list that Jesus gives. If I were to write a list of those who are blessed it might go something like this:

How blest are those who go South for the winter, for they shall stay warm.

How blest are the beautiful, for they will be admired.

How blest are the thin.

How blessed are the young.

How blessed are the happily married.

How blessed are you when people admire you, and imitate you and wish to be like you, for you will have high self-esteem.

That's the way most of us think most of the time, and so it is very, very strange when Jesus offers this alternate list of blessings and woes. The blessings fall on those we think are cursed, and the woes fall on those we think are blessed. So what is going on? Why is Jesus saying something so very strange?

The key to these strange sayings is that Jesus is contrasting life now with life in God's kingdom. God's kingdom, as Jesus' Prayer says, is when God's will is done on earth as in heaven. God's kingdom is the way the world would work if God was in charge. Now it is not God's will that is done, but the will of Caesars and Herods and Presidents and global markets and corporate empires and malevolent viruses; Now we live in a world of systematic inequality and chronic injustice; Now we live in a world where some people are considered of enormous importance while others are considered expendable and disposable; Now, in short, we live in a sinful world.

Life in God's kingdom – or to use somewhat different language, God's New Creation – is very different:

- In God's New Creation everyone will be treated with the dignity we all deserve as children of God.
- You may be poor, hungry and persecuted now, but in God's New Creation you will be filled and content.
- In God's New Creation, there will no longer be rich and poor because everyone will have what they need.
- In God's New Creation, there will no longer be hungry and overfed because food will be distributed fairly.
- In God's New Creation, there will no longer be persecuted and persecutors because there will be no rich and powerful who violently defend their privilege against the poor because there will be no poor.
- God's New Creation is good news for the poor and bread for the hungry and comfort for the grieving and release for the captive.

But what does God's New Creation mean for the rich, the full and the content? Why does Jesus predict that they will experience woe? Some people interpret this passage as saying that God's New Creation will bring about a reversal of

fortune - that rich and poor will simply swap places - but I don't think that is quite right. It will not be God's New Creation if the rich and the poor simply reverse places, but the same inequalities are maintained. It will only be God's New Creation if those inequalities are eliminated.

I think that Jesus pronounces woes for those who would have difficulty adjusting to God's New Creation. God's New Creation means that the rich and powerful will lose their privilege and be treated like everyone else. God's New Creation means that the white will lose their white privilege, the straight will lose their straight privilege, and the male will lose their male privilege. God's New Creation means that those who are used to having too much will now have the same as everyone else. God's New Creation means that the rich, powerful, admired, the white, male and straight, people who have derived their sense of self-esteem from being over and above and better than other people, will now find themselves having to redefine their identity as being alongside other people, equal rather than superior. God's New Creation is ultimately better for everyone, but men will have a harder time adjusting than women, the white will have a harder time than racialized, straight and cis-gendered folk will have a harder time adjusting than LGBTQ, the rich and powerful and admired will have a harder time adjusting, until we realize that we are happier and more secure and healthier as a part of a community than we ever were close to the top of a slippery pyramid.

In 1968, the Roman Catholic bishops of Latin America, in response to passages like this one, coined the phrase, "God's preferential option for the poor," which one of my teachers said really means "God's strategic emphasis on the poor." God doesn't love poor people more than anyone else; God loves us all. But in order to love both rich and poor, God strategically seeks to improve the lot of the poor. The story of our faith is the story of a God who again and again intervenes, through prophets and apostles, to stand in solidarity with the poor and the hungry and the suffering. And the story of our faith is the story of how the Word become flesh, Jesus, who lived among us as one of the least of these, a poor peasant from a poor village who became a refugee and a wayfarer, who died as one of the disposable and expendable, who took upon himself the sinful inequalities of our world, and overcame them, so that we might have a different vision of human community. In the words of the letter to the Philippians, Christ Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself still further and

become obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Jesus’ self-emptying solidarity with the suffering is the pattern for how Christians approach power and wealth. At first, it seems like woe, because it requires the wealthy and the powerful to humble ourselves, to empty ourselves of status, to surrender our privileges and that is not easy. But in the end, it is blessing, because just as God exalted Jesus by raising him from death, so also we discover in the process of emptying ourselves that we gain much more than we ever gave up.

As a church, we try to live out God’s New Creation in our life together. We try to do God’s will on earth, here and now. We do that very imperfectly, but we still try. Even when the world around us is hell-bent on building hierarchies and inequalities, we are dedicated to overcoming them. What it means to be a community of faith in Jesus Christ is to be a community centred on transforming the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of God. What it means to be the church is to acknowledge each person as a child of God, as a unique and precious creation. Here every person is welcomed equally and uniquely through the sacrament of baptism. Here each person is welcomed around the communion table equally and uniquely. Here we tell the stories of God’s New Creation as promise and judgment on the hierarchies and inequalities of this world. Here we each offer what we can so that all will share equally in the blessings of God’s creation. Or at least that is what we are supposed to do.

We come to this place with the baggage of inequality. We can’t simply escape the divisions of race, gender, orientation, class and education that separate us from each other. Some of us are richer and some poorer, some better fed than others, some more powerful than others, some live with the shame and humiliation of being failures in the eyes of the world. And too often the patterns of our church life simply end up reproducing the patterns of privilege and shame that are so common in the world around us. But in a faithful community, those who are humiliated and disgraced by the ways of the world are treated as beloved children of God and experience good news and deliverance and satisfaction. In a faithful community, the privileged follow Jesus in the difficult and demanding work of self-emptying so that they can be in a community of equals. But in the process of that self-emptying the privileged lose the anxiety of trying to stay on top and gain the joyful awareness that they are always – for richer or poorer in sickness and in health – they are always children of God.

One Sunday morning, the participants in a conservative church in a wealthy community were surprised to notice a young man walking down the centre aisle part way through the service. The church was right across the street from a college and this was obviously one of the more eccentric students from that college. The young man's appearance was a sharp contrast to the Sunday morning best of most of the people in the congregation. He had wild hair, a tee-shirt that was torn in places, a pair of very worn blue jeans, and no shoes. He wandered down the aisle looking for a place to sit, and it wasn't long before every eye in the place was fixed on him. The sanctuary was full, so eventually he just squatted on the ground close to the front. Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, this had never happened in this church before!

By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick. About this time, people start to notice that, from way at the back of the church, an usher is slowly making his way toward Bill. This usher is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, and a three-piece suit. This man has been an usher for as long as anyone can remember. He is a godly man. Very elegant. Very dignified. He walks with a cane and, as he starts walking toward this strange young man, everyone is saying to themselves that he will do what needs to be done to restore decorum to the service.

The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The minister can't even preach the sermon until the usher does what he has to do. The elderly man reaches the side of the young man, and drops his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill. He even reaches out and gently takes Bill's hand.

A crackling silence holds the entire congregation in stillness. When the minister gains control of himself, he says, "What I was about to preach, you would never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget. For today, God's kingdom is in the midst of us."