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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton Wisconsin
Luke 6: 17-26

For the last several weeks, a group of church members and friends have been gathering to discuss the Gospel of Luke. Reading scripture, in my estimation, is one of the most meaningful practices we can engage in as Christians. All the better when we get to ponder scripture in community.

I cherish the questions and reflections people bring to these gatherings. I love to trace the themes that emerge as we read. For instance, how the entirety of the biblical story follows an arc of God creating out of love and then acting out of grace and mercy to redeem and save that beloved Creation from all that would harm it. And how the four gospels each have their own unique way of telling the story of Jesus. Matthew is determined to prove that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Mark is more concerned with what Jesus does than what he teaches along the way. John, on the other hand, lets Jesus wax poetic for paragraphs on end as he makes the case for believing and following the way, the truth, and the life. From the first page to the last, Luke gives us the Great Reversal, in which prevailing expectations and conventional wisdom are scattered willy-nilly like grain in a parable.

The Great Reversal is first proclaimed with Mary's Magnificat. This fierce unwed mother sings a radical anthem upon learning she will give birth to the Messiah. "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." We see this in the narrative itself, when the news of Christ's birth is delivered not to fancy kings but to third shift agricultural workers. The first time Jesus teaches in public, he riffs on a passage from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He is this close to blowing a holy gasket when the Disciples just cannot stop yapping about which of them is greatest. *The least among you. The one who welcomes a child. The servant. Oh my gosh you guys, how are you not getting this.*

If you are paying even a whit of attention to the bright red thread woven through every page of Luke's gospel, you are not even a little surprised that these blessings and woes sound inside out and upside down.

Some scholars believe that the Aramaic word Jesus would have spoken is better translated as "How good life is" - as in, "How good life is for you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven." How strange it is to say that the poor and hungry, grieving and hated are the ones living the good life. We tend to think that it's the wealthy, well-fed, happy-go-lucky, and powerful who are living large. Not in the Kingdom of God that

Jesus came to proclaim. The Aramaic translation does give us some clarity, however. The blessing isn't in the first half of the beatitude. Jesus isn't valorizing poverty or romanticizing hunger. The blessing arrives in the second half of the beatitude, when God reaches out in justice and mercy to make things right.

Of course, the woe lands in the second half of the beatitude as well. When God reaches out in justice and mercy to make things right, it is best not to be laughing it up on the wrong side of history.

I suspect it's the presence of the woes that make most people prefer Matthew's version of the Beatitudes to Luke's, at least people who have the resources to forget God. Of course, it's a good thing to have enough food on the table. Of course it's a good thing not to be heartbroken. Of course, it's a good thing to live in fear of persecution.

And yet it's not a good thing to wrap ourselves in so many privileges that we forget we are vulnerable. It's not a good thing to encase ourselves in so many comforts we fail to love our neighbor. Rather, it is a catastrophe to be oblivious to how much we need God, and to make do with sorry substitutes like wealth and power and mindless nonstop entertainment.

And it is a gift to know how much we need God. A blessing. Look at all those people rushing to Jesus. They were desperate for words that were good and true. They lived in an occupied land, and many of their religious leaders had compromised their moral integrity for the sake of survival and the peace that is not peace but pacification.

But they needed and wanted more than words, even good and true ones. Their need for Jesus was comprehensive. Total. They were desperate for healing, too. It's a little embarrassing if you were brought up to keep your ailments to yourself. They're waiving their diseased limbs around and openly talking about their unclean spirits.

It's not a respectable scene. But their desperation allows them to see a profound truth: one with healing power came down with them and stood on a level place right there in the midst of them. He doesn't keep them at a safe distance. They are at rock bottom, and God comes within reach. Rock bottom is famous for being the place where Jesus is most likely to hang out, waiting for you to collapse into his healing embrace.

One wise pastor puts it this way: the place of your great pain is the place where God is at work in your life.

I suspect this is one reason why worship has been so joyful lately. Many people in our community of faith are carrying heavy burdens. We are troubled. And we flock here seeking solace; longing to be touched by the One who has power to make all things well. Our pain is honored; our lamentations are heard. Our cries for justice are sustained and amplified by the One who promises an upside-down kingdom. We are comforted but not coddled, because there is work to do. Perhaps above all else, through Word and Sacrament the living Christ reminds us that hope is more reasonable than despair. How good life is, to receive such a blessing.

The Great Reversal has already begun tilting the board. Thanks be to God.