

Epiphany 6C (2/17/2019)

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

Although we seek to drive them as far apart as possible, rich and poor live in close proximity. Jesus speaks of the poor and the rich in the same breath, insisting that God's future means blessing for those who suffer hardship in the present age. Those of us who want to partake in that blessing probably ought to be standing beside them.

In any conversation about the Beatitudes, there's bound to be at least one person who points out right away that in Matthew's version Jesus blesses the poor *in spirit*. After all, there are many ways to be poor, and Jesus is speaking to the poverty of the human condition in general, right? But in Luke, the first Beatitude is unambiguous: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Why do you think we're so quick to generalize or spiritualize a statement that's so straightforward? Why do you think we're resistant to hearing Luke's Jesus bless the economically poor?

It might have something to do with the fact that Luke's Jesus also cautions the rich. Good news for the poor, it seems, has implications for those who are not poor. To symbolize this promise, Luke chooses a distinct setting for Jesus' great sermon, of which our Gospel today is a part. In Matthew, Jesus pronounces the Beatitudes from a mountainside, but in Luke, the parallel teaching takes place on a plain: "He came down with them and stood on a level place...." **A level place, like a community where the poor, the hungry, and the excluded find real,**

material blessing; a level place, like a community that clothes its least honorable members with greater honor, so that there may be no dissension within the body;¹ a level place, like a community where those who have much don't have too much, and those who have little don't have too little.²

The fact is, however, we don't want that kind of community. We'd rather order the world according to our preferred categories, and socioeconomic status is a favorite. Isn't it easier to know where you stand if you can quantify the value of your life relative to the lives of others? Economic circumstances are a measure of worthiness, aren't they? – hard work, discipline, wisdom. Who wants to be on the same level with everybody else when you can stand apart, when you can provide for your own needs and desires and pat yourself on the back in the process? **Who wants to bless the poor when you've earned the right to bless yourself?**

No wonder we seek to drive rich and poor as far apart as possible. **Consciously or not, we arrange our professional lives, our social lives, even our communities to avoid economic intermingling.** We build gates around our neighborhoods, for goodness' sake. Some of us are so far removed from poverty, in fact, that it exists only in theory, or in passing. "The poor" dwell in an entirely different reality, and only come into view to provide goods or services, or to cause a disturbance.

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:23-25.

² Exodus 16:18; 2 Corinthians 8:15.

Neill Blomkamp's 2013 dystopia *Elysium* examines socioeconomic stratification in the extreme. The film imagines a bleak future where the superrich escape the ruins of Earth to live on a luxury space station in orbit. The billions of people left behind scrape by under repressive corporate rule, plagued by poverty and disease. And, while medicine has advanced such that all afflictions are curable, the cures are available only to the residents of Elysium. So, coyotes charge an exorbitant fee to fly dying people on rogue missions to the space station, few of which are successful.

As far apart as we imagine rich and poor to be, however, the fact is that we live in close proximity. Those of us who are economically secure may succeed in pushing the poor from our minds, nevertheless we share the same spaces. Even if the circumstances of our lives are dramatically different, we travel the same streets, we work in the same quarters, we live minutes apart. Consider Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should

listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”³

In eternity, the chasm between Hades and the bosom of Abraham is no wider than the chasm between the rich man and Lazarus in life. Lazarus languishes just outside the rich man’s gates, but they might as well be a world apart.

Dear church, **God’s future is a level place. Jesus speaks of the poor and the rich in the same breath for a reason. It’s not lost on him that economics, perhaps more than any other factor, have a way of dividing human community. Economics have a way of removing our hearts, if not our bodies, far from one another. But, God promises to bridge that gap in the fullness of time, to bring down the powerful from high places and lift up the lowly.⁴ And, Jesus invites us to live into that vision even now, even as we have yet to see it take shape. To quote one interpreter, in the meantime people of faith bear witness to “God’s good future hurtling toward us, bringing the finished work of God to an unfinished world.”⁵ That future means blessing for those who suffer hardship in the present age. And, those of us who want to partake in that blessing probably ought to be standing beside them.⁶**

³ Luke 16:19-31.

⁴ Luke 1:52.

⁵ Thomas Long, cited by Cleophus J. LaRue, in “Living by the Word,” *The Christian Century*, January 2, 2019, 19.

⁶ See “Images in the Readings,”

<https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.