

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
February 13, 2022**

SCRIPTURES:

Jeremiah 17:5-8	Curses or blessings: depending on whom you trust.
Psalms 1:1-6	Blessed and prosperous the ones who trust in the Lord.
1 Corinthians 15:12,16-20	If Christ is not alive, why do we believe?
Luke 6:17, 20-26	Blessings and woes: not just beatitudes.

BIBLE BACKGROUND:

Luke:

Unlike Matthew for whom the beatitudes contain only blessings, in Luke, there are curses also for those who do not do the works that lead to blessings! With this oratorical device, the speaker can bring special emphasis to the points he is making: Blessed are those who do and cursed are those who do not!

Nine blessings in Matthew, four blessings and four woes in Luke -- that is how these two communities remembered and proclaimed the countercultural (to use a modern term) teaching of Jesus. No one then and no one today feels that it’s a blessing to be poor. But to have become poor because one heard and followed the call of Christ is not a curse. To have sorrows thrust upon us because we have become disciples will surely be turned into joy by the power of God.

We need to remember that in Luke, as in Matthew, Jesus is addressing those who already are his disciples and who have come to suffering, pain, and rejection because of their discipleship. It is not just old, secular kinds of poverty and pain that bring blessings, but poverty, pain, and rejection suffered for the sake of being a Christian.

Blessings in the Greek language are associated with the status of gods. The *blessed ones* are the gods. Even Paul uses the word to describe God the Father and Creator (1 Timothy 1:11 and 6:15). Blessedness here means becoming intimately united to God; become one with God, sharing in the happiness of God.

The values and ideals of the Gospel have been reduced to mere skeletons of themselves in the Western world due to the influence of Roman law. We had to make laws out of the values taught by Jesus so that we would know when we had violated them! Originally, the teachings of Jesus were not enunciated as laws. In the Hebrew tradition, *law* does not have the same meaning as it does in the Greek and Roman world. In the culture within which Jesus lived and taught, *law* means *torah*, or *teaching* and *ideal value*, rather than juridical enactment, the violation of which leads to punishment. That is why we have a hard time aligning the beatitudes with the commandments. The Ten Commandments are more easily reduced to laws in the Western sense than the beatitudes.

“God will bless you when...” does not readily lend itself to a handbook of legal enactments. “Woe to you rich...!” does not sound much like a law. But it is a *teaching* and it communicates a *value* by which the followers of Jesus need to measure their lives.

The Gospel is better moral *guidance* than it is moral *law*. But we fear using words like *guidance* and *ideals* and *values* because these are weak when compared to *laws*!

Jeremiah:

Judah is about to bring destruction upon itself. It seeks its security in foreign entanglements which bring spiritual corruption and idolatry to the very heart of the nation. How can such a people survive? Were they not planted in the Lord at the beginning of their life as a people? How can they allow their roots now to draw from the barrenness of non-believers? What is to be gained from alliances with corrupt nations? Only corruption and death can come from worshipping false gods. *Blessings / Curses*: ancient peoples believed in the power of blessings and in the power of curses. The power came from the one who uttered the blessing or the curse. It was like magic or superstition for primitive persons. Blessings and curses were blind and uncaring. It did not matter if you were innocent or if you were guilty. The prophet introduces a development in the understanding of blessings and curses: those depend on the choices the nation will make. They can choose a path that will lead to happiness or one that will lead to woe. The choices are theirs; they will bring the consequences upon themselves.

1 Corinthians:

Paul continues his debate with the Christians of Corinth who have difficulty with the teaching about the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Their philosophical presuppositions, from Greek culture, prevented them from appreciating the value of material reality; only the spiritual had value. How could the physical body of Jesus be given such exaltation when all that is good is achieved in getting rid of the body? Paul confronts them with the absurdity of their position by pointing out its ultimate consequence: If Christ was not raised in the body, then you are still in your sins and your faith is groundless!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Read the beatitudes in Matthew (5:3-11) and in Luke (6:20-16). Compare the emphasis that each brings to these words of Jesus. How does Luke differ from Matthew in itemizing the values by which Jesus wants his disciples to live? Which of the two versions do you find easier to understand? Is Luke's version of the teaching of Jesus easier to live up to? Why? Why does the Church need *both* versions?

2. Matthew has Jesus pronouncing the beatitudes on a mountaintop; in Luke, Jesus preaches this sermon on a plain or on the journey to Jerusalem. What is the particular significance of each? Would you rather be taught by Jesus who sits at the top of a mountain and hands down divine teaching like Moses from Mount Sinai? Or would you rather be taught by Jesus who is journeying with you toward the fulfillment of God's purposes on the road to crucifixion and resurrection?

3. In what ways will we begin to share in God's holiness when we begin to practice the virtues of the beatitudes? Jesus lived by these values and ideals. We begin to share in his holiness when we imitate his way of living. Evaluate what your friends think of these ideals for Christian behavior. Do they admire people who live like Jesus did? Or do they look down on such behaviors as *weak and unproductive*? What does this say about the values of our modern culture?

PRAYER

**Remember, God of mercy, all who struggle, suffer and die
to bring forth a world of closer relationship.
May your reign of justice, peace, and love
come to people of every race and tongue.
May the earth be filled with your glory.**

(Prayer of Pope Paul VI)

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE:

“The goal of the virtuous life is to become like God” (St. Gregory of Nyssa). Christians practice the human and the religious virtues because they have come into a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who are “in Christ” through faith cannot live like those who have no faith. A certain standard and code of behavior becomes a witness to the encounter we have had with the Lord. Living according to the standards set by God becomes our badge of identity. We want to live like the God who has given us everything we have. We choose to live virtuously because we love God, not because we resent the God who has imposed those standards on us.

Virtuous living is not something imposed arbitrarily as a punishment by God for those who have come to believe in God. Living out the ideals of the New Covenant comes not as an imposition on a reluctant Christian but as an opportunity to bear witness to the love and salvation that we have encountered in our relationship with Jesus Christ. We want to become like the One we love.

“Human virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous (person is the one) who freely practices the good” (*Catechism* #1804).

The traditional classification of the virtues are these: Cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Good moral living calls the Christian to strive in the development of virtue as a sign of God’s grace and God’s mercy. Since we are forgiven sinners, we need to testify to the power of God’s love and mercy in our lives. We do that by living according to the standards set for us by God in the Ten Commandments, in the Sermon on the Mount (or Sermon on the Plain), in the Great Commandment, in the witness of the life and virtues of Jesus of Nazareth.

When the practice of virtue is motivated by love for God and for his Son, Jesus Christ, virtuous living is not a burden. “He’s not heavy; he’s my brother!” the boy said to Father Flanagan of Boys Town as he carried another boy on his shoulders. Love of God and love of neighbor release the energies that we need to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. We move easily from virtuous living to heroism when we experience love deeply in our lives. A sense of duty may help us not to get into trouble, but it takes love for us to choose to lay down our life for another person.

See: The *Catechism*: #1699+

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