

**February 16-17, 2018**

***"The Level Ground of the Gospel"***

**Dr. Keith D. Herron, Senior Minister**

**St. Lucas UCC, St. Louis MO**

**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

**Luke 6:17-26**

**Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; I Corinthians 15:12-20**

Scientists tested a special pair of optical lenses that make everything appear upside-down. Not only is everything upside-down, it's also backward. So, up is down; down is up; left is right; and right is left. Put simply, this is how convex and concave lenses operate and how those lenses help us perceive the world. Concave lenses produce an upright, albeit slightly smaller image. Convex lenses do the opposite, where the image produced is real but inverted, depending on where the object was in relation to the lens' focal point.

In an experiment that was done a few years ago, a woman was given a pair of these convex lens glasses for a week. The purpose was to see what would happen to her ability to function in an upside-down/backward world. The immediate effect was predictable. She was completely dysfunctional. She couldn't do anything for herself. She couldn't walk without bumping into things. She couldn't eat without dumping food on her blouse. She couldn't put the right shoe on the right foot, nor could she tie her shoe laces. Instead of combing her hair, she scratched her chin. When she tried to brush her teeth, she scrubbed her forehead. Life was tough because she was all but helpless in her upside-down, backward world.

But the most interesting thing developed by the second day as she began to do things for herself. She still bumped into things, but she bumped into them less often. She still slopped her food at lunch, but more and more of it got into her mouth. By supper time of the second day, she didn't trip over anything on the way to the table. She hardly spilled any food. She was even able to take her dishes to the kitchen without breaking them. Her progress was phenomenal. After a few more days, she was able to do everything she could always do and acted as if she had always done them that way. You see, she had completely adjusted to her upside-down-reverse world. In other words, she had learned to adapt to it.<sup>1</sup>

In Luke's gospel, we have the *lesser* sermon as it's known, the sermon commonly known as the Sermon on the Plain. It's similar to the sermon we all know so well as the Sermon on the Mount but it has an edgier, grittier sound to it. In contrast, Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, has a "smoothed over feel" to it, almost as if it's a stone that's been rubbed smooth from use. Here in Luke's gospel, Jesus comes down from the mountaintop where he has been praying to a level

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<sup>1</sup> From David Russell, Pastor, FBC, Arthur, Illinois (sermon) "An Upside Down World," 2/15/98

place in order to speak to the people. And when we listen to him, *"for those with ears to hear,"* we are struck by its amazing clarity and directness. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is radical and shocking.

In Luke's Sermon on the Plain, Jesus pronounces *"blessings,"* as he does in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but he goes a step further and also announces a series of *"woes,"* as a counter-balance to the blessings of the kingdom. This is the duality of truth, a realism in faith that admits there is good news/bad news to everything in life. When in Luke's version, Jesus says simply, *"Blessed are the poor."* Matthew takes the edge off that statement by euphemistically saying, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit."* Where Luke says simply, *"Blessed are the hungry,"* Matthew softens it with *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness."*

See the difference? One commentator observed that when we hear Luke's Sermon on the Plain, with all its directness and cutting simplicity, we want to scurry back to Matthew's gospel because it's already been softened for us. All the dirty work of watering down the gospel has been done and we can effectively ignore it. Luke's gospel is harder to hear because we have fewer ways to dodge its obvious meaning.

Jesus goes on to say *"Blessed are those who weep"* and *"Blessed are those who are hated because of me."* What kind of blessings are those? To be poor and hungry and crying and ostracized? These are the blessings of God?

But that's only half of it. He goes on to pronounce curses ... *Woe to you who are rich ... Woe to you who are full ... Woe to you who are laughing ... Woe to you when all shall speak well of you.* Wait a minute ... these are the curses? To be rich, to be satisfied, to be laughing, to be well-liked? Which one of us wouldn't think those are what will make us happy? What in the world is Jesus talking about?

We are not poor and more than that, we don't want to be. And while we may not think of ourselves as rich, most of the world does. In much of the world, as one person put it, if you are able to decide what you will have for dinner, have some method of getting around wherever you want to go whenever you wish, and have a change of clothes or comfortable shoes to wear ... you're rich! Our problem is that we are comparing our economic state with the world's elite and thinking we are close to the financial edge when in reality every one of us is rich.

We're certainly not hungry. Most of us have too much to eat. We throw away enough food in America to feed a good part of the hungry world.

How about weeping? Maybe there we might qualify for some sense of blessing. Life is still filled with terrible injustices ("bad things happen to all of us") and there is a sense in which perhaps we can share in some of the world's pain. All our money and all the resources we have at our fingertips cannot completely shield us from the

pain of suffering or loss. It's no small irony that America is ridden with depression and anxiety. But it is also true that our suffering is nothing to compare to the daily reminders of injustice and pain that the poor and the dispossessed feel.

Anyone keeping score? It's no small irony that the woes are some of our most desired qualities. We spend a great portion of our time and livelihood building wealth. Some call themselves "foodies" as connoisseurs of good wine and good food. We earnestly desire to be happy and to laugh and we want everyone to like us. Who wouldn't want these things? And so we ask again: What was Jesus thinking? What was he talking about?

These words are best understood as a window in which we understand that the Kingdom of God is an inverted world. What is up in our limited human understanding is truly down in a spiritual sense. Jesus is pointing us to a new way of seeing the world. Luke is telling us that when Jesus came down off the mountain where he was praying, he came down to where all the people were and he stood with them on level ground. This is another way of Luke emphasizing what Jesus has already so eloquently said, that his ministry was intended for all those who are poor, for the captives, for the blind and for all those who are oppressed. It's a gospel that Jesus said was meant for everyone, not just for the privileged and the rich and the powerful.

I can almost hear you thinking, "I get it. This is the way that it will be someday when the end of time comes. This is about the kingdom of the pie in the sky."

So is this message Jesus' way of describing some moment in the future? Luke would say "Yes" and "No." In this sermon, Luke helps us hear that Jesus is saying that the present and the future are somehow joined together in some mysterious way. The eschatological reality of *someday* is already beginning with the advent of Jesus. Jesus has already announced as much: "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*" And the "today" that Jesus announced continues through to the present moment. In fact it has always been the work of the church to make the future sense of "today" a reality in this present moment. The prophecy of Isaiah concerning the poor, the imprisoned, the diseased and the oppressed is no longer just a hope, it is the agenda for all the followers of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Which brings us back to those glasses that allow a person to see the upside-down world. Are we the ones seeing things upside-down, or is God? Do we have things turned around, or is Jesus the one who is upside-down and backwards?

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation*, 87-89