

11:00 Church of the Epiphany, Epiphany 6, Luke 6: 17-26.

Good morning, Church. Hachoo!

(They say, God bless you!) Thank you for blessing me. I am one of those people who feel compelled to bless someone after they sneeze. I have wondered from time to time what is that about? Where did that response come from, to bless someone after they sneeze? A few weeks ago, in an article about colds and the cold season, the Washington Post answered my questions. It mentioned some very old superstitions about sneezing.

Some people believed sneezing caused the soul to escape the body through the nose. Saying, "God bless you" would stop the devil from claiming the person's freed soul. Another superstition was that the heart momentarily stops when you sneeze (it doesn't), and that saying "God bless you" is a way of welcoming the person back to life. Whereas Greeks wished each other "Long life!" after a sneeze, and Romans saluted each other's health, it was Pope Gregory the Great, who coined the phrase "God bless you" in the 6th century during a bubonic plague epidemic. I'm guessing there was a great need for blessings of all kind at that time.

What does it really mean to bless someone? What does it mean to be blessed by someone? What happens when we are blessed by God? It is the significance of blessing and being blessed that I want to talk about this morning.

In our holy scriptures, blessings are important. They are pronouncements of God's favor. God repeatedly blesses Abraham and Sarah and all of their many descendants. Jacob wrestles with the angel and won't let go until he has received a blessing from God. Nothing is more important for children, both in the Bible and in life, than that they receive their parent's blessing. Nothing can be more painful than if that blessing is denied.

In our gospel this morning we hear Luke's version of Jesus' famous sermon to his disciples. Unlike Matthew's version of this story called the Sermon on the Mount, this one in Luke is called the Sermon on the Plain because Jesus does not go up a mountain to address the crowd. Instead, he comes down and stands on a level place with the crowd. That's an important image symbolically for Luke because Luke, more than any other gospel writer, really saw Jesus as the champion of the poor, the advocate for the outcast and the savior of the lost and forgotten. This is the first moment of Jesus' public teaching after he has chosen his disciples. A great crowd has gathered to hear and be healed by him. He's about to lay out some of the essential ingredients of discipleship, but how does he begin? With four blessings and four woes that are each connected to one of the blessings.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. If you compare it to the Matthew version, the message is a little different. In Matthew, the words are "blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." Blessed are those... is not

anywhere near as direct as “Blessed are *you* who are standing here right this minute.” And Matthew also softens the edges for those of us who are materially well off. Blessed are those who are *poor in spirit*. Luke says, Blessed are you who are poor. Period. As in no money, no home, no food, no power. Matthew lets some of us with material wealth in the door because ours is an impoverishment of the soul. Luke has none of that. Luke’s contrast are much more stark. There are the Haves and the Have-nots. Luke says, Blessed are you who are hungry, now, not hunger for righteousness as in Matthew but hungry, right now, empty stomach, aching at the center of your body for nourishment so that you can stay alive. You who are hungry now, you are blessed and will be filled up. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you who are rejected and persecuted for my sake, for great is your reward in heaven. The stakes are higher in Luke.

“Blessed are you” translates from the Greek as something like, “Happy are you..” or “How fortunate you are...” How fortunate that you are poor? Interesting juxtaposition of words, isn’t it? This is a signal that in the kingdom of God, we can expect a reversal of fortune.

Jesus offers us his picture of the kingdom of God where everything is upside down. The poor, the hungry, the sad, the rejected are on top. Not because they are better people necessarily, or morally or religiously superior, but because the kingdom of God is about restoration of wholeness. Of balance. Jesus is saying, If you are very satisfied with your self and your earthly possessions and your station in life, then you need to be emptied of some of your self-satisfaction. That will move you towards wholeness. If you are hungry, you need to be filled up with food and God’s blessing. That will move you towards wholeness. Both blessings and woes address this imbalance, this restoration of wholeness. This is how Jesus begins his teaching about the kingdom of God.

Did you know that today is Theological Education Sunday? Well, it is and our new presiding bishop Katherine Jefferts Schiori, has asked all Episcopal Churches to take this occasion seriously, to recognize and celebrate those who teach and learn in their search for a deeper knowledge and understanding of God. Perhaps you were able to be part of the discussion that Caroline and Tanya and Justin hosted in the 10:oclock hour about our specific theological education needs and desires here at Epiphany.

We all want to know more about God. That’s why we’re here this morning. That is exactly what the crowd in today’s gospel was doing. They showed up to learn more about God. They, too, wanted a deeper knowledge and understanding of God. They wanted to hear and be healed by Jesus, the ultimate theological educator.

When Jesus says, Blessed are you... he wants you to hear, “You are valuable, you belong, you are beloved by God, and you have not been forgotten.” When Jesus says, Woe to you... he wants you to know that you still belong to God, but God has high expectations for all of us. For the kingdom of God, some of us need to take some new responsibility for our move toward wholeness. I’m wondering what is getting in the way

of wholeness for you? For some of us it is an empty stomach. For some of us it is a full stomach. Blessed are you who are living on the streets! Woe to you who have benefited from systems of wealth that have forced others into the streets! Blessed are you who are hungry and sad and rejected. Woe to you who have tolerated or participated in structures of violence and oppression that keep people hungry and sad and rejected. Woes are not about feeling guilty. But they are an opportunity to move toward wholeness. Woes are really blessings in disguise. That is the theological education that Jesus wants us to receive today.

Jesus begins his theological education message with a blessing, with a vision of wholeness for all people. Luke tells us: *All* in the crowd were trying to touch him and *all* were healed. Not just some. All.

Why do we bless people when they sneeze? Why is “Blessing” the first word in the statement form Revelation over the arch here that graces our sanctuary at Church of the Epiphany? Why is the blessing the last thing we do in our Eucharistic liturgy before we are sent out into the world? Because the power of blessing and the need to be blessed is unavoidable in our human story. When God blesses us, we are reminded of God’s steadfast love and unwavering commitment to us. When we bless each other, we release the goodness in each other, to help each of us move towards wholeness and the kingdom of God. I want to close with a blessing that I bet you will recognize from the book of Numbers, chapter 6. The Lord comes to Moses to teach him a special benediction: “This is the way you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” Amen.