

Sunday, February 17, 2019  
Rev. Jessica Paulsen  
FPC, Corning  
Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Luke 6:17-26

### Fullness and Emptiness

I want to tell you a story about tomatoes. This story comes from my childhood, when I was only 3 or 4 years old, so I don't necessarily remember it but it's one of those stories that becomes part of your history.

So—tomatoes. I love tomatoes. I loved eating them then, and I still love eating them now. But apparently, when I was that young, I loved tomatoes so much that I only wanted to eat tomatoes. And the story is, that when we'd sit around the table for supper, if I could see tomatoes, I wouldn't eat anything else. My parents would actually have to remove the tomatoes from the table, put them out of my sight, just so I would eat the rest of the meal. That's some dedication to tomatoes, right there, isn't it?

But it's not healthy. Eating only tomatoes for a meal will not fill you up nor will it give your body the energy it needs. Our bodies need a variety of nutrients. We cannot survive on just tomatoes.

Our souls, our spiritual selves, are similar in that regard. We must be aware of what we are using to nourish and feed our souls—aware of what we have or do not have in this world.

In our passage today, Jesus has some interesting things to say about blessings and woes—about things of this world. This passage is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain that we find here in the gospel of Luke. It's often compared to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that is found in Matthew's gospel with which many of us are more familiar—Matthew's text has the version of the Beatitudes that are probably most well-known—"blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are

The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc.” Those are the ones we know. These blessings and woes found in Luke we don’t talk about as much. Probably because they can potentially be more challenging.

Matthew writes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” while Luke states simply, “Blessed are the poor.” Matthew writes, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” while Luke just says, “Blessed are you who are hungry now.” And Matthew doesn’t include any woes while Luke makes sure to include, “Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full now, woe to you who are laughing now.” It’s much easier for us to understand blessed are the poor in spirit because we have probably all at one time or another been poor in spirit. It’s harder to hear Jesus say blessed are the poor and woe to you who are rich because not all of us are or have ever been poor. The same is true of hunger. We might often say, “oh, we’re so hungry,” but most of us have probably never known true hunger.

So, what are we supposed to do with these words of Jesus?

First, I think it’s a reminder of what our priorities ought to be and what we depend on to nourish our souls. If you’re depending on riches or food or laughter/happiness, to keep you close to God, to nourish your spiritual self, and keep your soul healthy, you are going down a wrong path. Those things might seem to make our lives easier, but they won’t bring us into a deeper relationship with God—just like tomatoes won’t keep our bodies healthy or enable us to grow stronger.

Does that mean, then, that in order to grow closer to God we must be poor, or hungry, or sad? Not necessarily. For we need to also consider the perspective and context of the passage, especially since there is a similar passage in Matthew—what are the differences, how does Luke shift our understanding with the way he writes.

The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

Thomas Frank, a university professor, explains it this way:

What a difference perspective makes. In Matthew, I sense Jesus looking down, inviting me to come up and see the big picture—a new covenant community of pure hearts and hunger for righteousness. In Luke, I sense Jesus is looking up at me [for we are down on the plain instead of up on the mount], as if to say, what are you doing right this minute? People are sick and dying right here, tormented by spirits. They have come from all over the land, from the coast to the river, from south to north, as far as you can go in a few days' journey. Will you get down here with me and help? (*Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2014. 160.).

The Jesus in Luke is challenging us to empty ourselves—empty out our riches, and way of doing things so that we might be filled with knowledge and compassion, filled with a better understanding of where we might find the kingdom, the realm of God. It comes down to what we fill our lives with—is God our foundation and comfort—the only place we have to turn? Or do we fill them with money, or TV, or food, or the variety of other things the world offers to us to make us feel happy and fulfilled? For as David Ostendorf puts it: “To be blessed of God is to have nothing but God” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2009. 358). We must not depend on the things of this world but depend solely upon God.

As Ostendorf goes on to say:

Jesus' Sermon on the Plain...jar[s] us out of our faithful complacency. The God Jesus speaks of is not always the God we proclaim. Our human inclination is to fit God into our own small definitions, cultures, and places. But God is always breaking down the barriers we construct to keep God in or out. Here, once again, God is calling us back. God is

The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

always reminding us that we must empty ourselves, turn away from the ways of the world, and then—and only then by God’s grace—receive the fullness of blessings God offers to the utterly destitute, the marginalized, the expendable. (Ibid., 360)

God wants more from us—is demanding more from us—than just our daily routine or just what we’re comfortable with. Jesus is imploring us to pay attention to the rest of the world, to the people who have nothing in this world but God, and to be with them.

I’m going to use Ostendorf’s words again here, because he says it so well:

God does not take kindly to halfheartedness. God does not bless us as we maintain the status quo, reaping accolades of those who hear us and follow us. God does not bless us as we bathe in respectability in the eyes of the world. God does not bless us as we quietly maintain tradition and gloss over or ignore prophetic voices calling us back to God...God does not bless us as we protect and build institutions and empires [and walls]. God does not bless us, well off, full, comfortable, hearty, and well spoken of. The realm of God rests among those who have nothing but God. (Ibid.)

This is the challenge of the blessings and woes that Jesus offers to his disciples in the Gospel of Luke.

We don’t always get to keep what we think we love—just as I couldn’t keep eating only tomatoes. Instead, we’re called to give up those things we’ve used to fill our lives—riches, pride, demands for safety—and find more fully where God is and how God is with others and with us—a knowledge we sometimes may only gain when we have nothing but God. We can live and thrive with only God. We can’t live and thrive with only tomatoes. May that be something we always remember and live.

The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.