

## The God Who Drove Mr. Spock Crazy

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Sunday, February 17, 2019

Jeremiah 17:5-10/Luke 6:17-26

The Gospel lesson for today is Luke's version of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." This is one of those passages I probably never would preach on if it was not assigned. Oh, I love what Jesus says later in his sermon; in fact, next week's Gospel lesson includes one of my favorite passages, one that describes an attitude toward life:

*Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over shall it be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use it shall be measured to you.*

Although I am not a fundamentalist about much, I do believe this is one of life's intractable principles. What you sow you also and ultimately will reap. We also reap in proportion to how generously we sow. We get to pick out the measuring cup life uses with us because it is the same one we use with life. That is something we all can understand, even if we don't apply it.

The part of Jesus' sermon that is assigned for today, however, just doesn't seem logical to our modern minds.

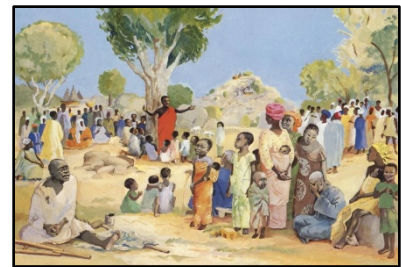
In Matthew's version of this sermon, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor **in Spirit** for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." That seems much more palatable than Luke's version, which says, "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping and rejected."

Matthew lets us off the hook. We can spiritualize it. Luke, however, has an obsession with poverty, and he reports that Jesus said it is the poor whose lives actually are blessed.

It is enough to make Mr. Spock's head explode. You remember Spock, don't you? He was the "Star Trek" character for whom everything needed to be logical, but, if we are to take Jesus seriously, God isn't always logical.

If we think Jesus saying the poor are blessed is illogical, imagine what Jesus' original listeners must have thought. In those days, most of the population of Israel was desperately poor, only a meal or two away from genuine starvation.

Put yourself in their place for a moment. One morning, you decide to take a break and go hear the rabbi everyone has been raving about. You wonder what is so special about him, and your wonder is compounded when you hear him say, "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are rejected." It is tempting to yell, "Are you crazy? Have you ever actually been poor?!?"



The truth is, he **has**.

The Gospel of Luke is very clear about this. Remember he was born in a barn with a feeding trough for his bed. In the Book of Luke, it isn't kings who come to visit Jesus, but poor, dirty, smelly shepherds. When Mary and Joseph go to present him at the temple when he is eight days old, they bring a pigeon, the cheapest offering they could make. In Jesus' first sermon, the one that almost got him thrown off a cliff, he reads from the Prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of God is upon me and has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."

Yes, Jesus knew poverty firsthand, which makes it even stranger that he would say that the poor and hungry are blessed. If you ever have been poor or hungry, you know it sure doesn't feel like you are being blessed. So, what does Jesus mean?

Well, one thing that is clear is that Jesus is distinguishing those material things in life that we sometimes call blessings from what it means to live a life that is called blessed by God. Remember, Jesus was speaking mostly to peasants in a backwater land. That day, the congregation was made up mostly of the poor, the hungry, the grieving, and the rejected.

Jesus is saying to them that, when you are feeling impoverished, hungry, depressed, or rejected, it doesn't mean your life is estranged or forgotten by God. Maybe what Jesus was trying to say to them, and to us, is:

**Blessed are you when you remember that life is about more than possessions, but woe to us when we feel rich, self-satisfied, self-sufficient. When we feel those things, we are on our own.**

In today's first reading, the prophet Jeremiah tried to tell us that our souls are in grave danger if we forget our utter dependence on God, if we trust ourselves to be enough.

- Woe to you who are not hungry, because you have no awareness of your deepest need, which is a connection to the Source, the water of life.
- Woe to you who know only joy, because there is still much in this world and in our own lives that needs grieving.

- Woe to you who feel approved, because if everyone loves what you are doing then you aren't doing much. You aren't challenging evil or standing with God on the side of the poor, the hungry, and the hopeless.

Perhaps Jesus is saying that it is only when we recognize our spiritual poverty and hunger that we can find the life that is blessed by God. The next time we are feeling like a self-made woman or man, hold your breath until you remember what happens to everything you value the moment that God withholds your next breath.



Billy Graham loved to tell the story about a Texas oilman who died and was buried in a gold-plated Cadillac. As they were lowering him and his Caddy into the ground, one of the gravediggers said, “Man, ain't that livin'?”

Well, it ain't, but it sometimes is hard to tell that from how we live our lives.



Russian rabbis tell a story that, long ago, there lived a man in Kraków named Isaac, son of Yekel, a very poor man whose family was often hungry. One night in a dream, he saw the distant city of Prague. There, he saw a particular bridge with a treasure buried beneath it. The dream was so vivid that he could not forget it, especially when it recurred every night for two weeks.

Finally, in order to get rid of the dream, he decided to walk from Kraków to Prague to see for himself. After several days of hungry travel, he arrived in Prague, found the bridge, and went underneath to see if he could find the treasure. Suddenly, a soldier grabbed him and started questioning him. What was he doing prowling under the bridge?

Being an innocent man, he told the truth. He was looking for a treasure he had dreamed was underneath the bridge. The soldier roared with laughter. "You stupid Jew! Don't you know that you cannot trust what you see in dreams? Why, for the last two weeks, I have dreamed that, far away, in Kraków, in the house of a Jew named Isaac, there is as treasure buried underneath the stove in his kitchen. Wouldn't it be the most idiotic thing in the world if I were to go all the way to Kraków to look for it? One could waste a lifetime looking for treasure that does not exist." Still laughing, the soldier gave Isaac a kick and let him go.

So, Isaac, son of Yekel, walked all the way back to Kraków, to his own home, where he moved the stove in his kitchen, found a treasure buried there, and lived to a ripe old age as a rich man.

The treasure was his all along, but the knowledge to find it required a long, hungry journey.



Early in my time here at First Presbyterian Church, before I had learned anyone's name, someone gave me some preaching advice in the common room after a service. They suggested that I would do better in New Canaan if I avoided making people feel guilty about being rich. I thanked them, but tried to explain that, although that might be true, it really is Jesus' fault.

I might have skipped today's scripture if it had not been assigned to me. If I had avoided these words, however, I might have missed the reminder that I am not self-sufficient. None of us are, and our lives would be more blessed if we remembered that.

It is only when I become aware of my moral poverty, my deeper spiritual hunger, it is only when I grieve all the opportunities to do good that I've missed, only when I risk the disdain of others to do what is right that my life is truly blessed by God.

We all have said, "Money can't buy happiness." That is true, but neither can poverty, unless it makes us more aware of our complete dependence on God. The testimony of scripture is that God has a soft spot for the poor, and Jesus came to be one of them.

Perhaps we are called to be one of them, too. We are called to be people who are aware of our own deep poverty and hunger and for that which only God can provide.