

**Good News for Somebody Else?
A Sermon by The Rev. Mary Marple Thies
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – February 13, 2022**

Please read:
Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
I Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

Back in my seminary days, I had a friend, who wrote a play entitled “Job’s Lane.” The inspiration for the title was a street sign she had spotted somewhere in the Hamptons on Long Island. Now I have never visited the Hamptons, but one writer offered this probably now dated description of them as “...home of Martha Stewart, Steven Spielberg, and numerous others of the very rich. There [the writer] had seen homes with two bedrooms on the market for \$6 million, a house with a 200-car garage, and other architectural obscenities.”ⁱ My friend must have had a similar observation of the vast wealth of the Hamptons, because the theme of her play was the reversal of the Biblical story of Job. In the Hebrew scripture, you may remember, Job was tested by God by having everything taken from him—his wealth, his children, and his health. In “Job’s Lane,” Job was tested by having everything given to him. The latter-day Job’s faith was tested by suddenly becoming rich.

I was reminded of “Job’s Lane” when confronted by this morning’s reading from Luke, who gives us a grittier version of Jesus’ beatitudes than Matthew. Not blessed are the poor in spirit but blessed are the poor. Not blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness but blessed are the hungry. And to make sure he gets his point across, here Jesus adds a list of complementary woes. Woe to you who are rich. Woe to you who are full. Woe to you who are laughing. Woe to you with a good reputation. With my comfortable house and full closet, my nice car and crowded refrigerator, I feel the sting of Jesus’ warning. I find myself nodding in agreement with preacher Will Willimon, who, after delivering a sermon at a church in a wealthy community, asked his wife, “Would you please explain to me what Jesus has got against rich people? I like rich people. I’ve met some great people who are rich. What’s the problem with Jesus?”ⁱⁱ

A part of me would like to blame these woes on Luke, who spends more of his gospel dealing with issues of wealth and poverty than any other gospel writer. He includes Mary’s song in which she sings that God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty.ⁱⁱⁱ In Luke, the rich and poor show up in Jesus’ parables and in his interactions, like the “rich fool” who plans to build a bigger barn to store all his goods only to die and leave it all behind;^{iv} the rich man who, during his life, ignored poor Lazarus at his front gate and upon his death, ends up in Hades;^v the rich young man who says he wants to follow Jesus until he is told to give up his possessions;^{vi} Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who spontaneously gives up half his wealth to the poor.^{vii}

Maybe we could just say Luke is obsessed, that it is not Jesus, at all, but Jesus sounds insistent, not only in these blessings and woes, but throughout the gospels. And Jesus’ concern about the prosperous was previewed by the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures, who frequently

called the wealthy to accounts. So, much as I would like to just spiritualize Jesus' words to make them less discomfoting, I think we have to take him at his word. I don't know whether you would describe yourself as rich. Maybe you don't have a 200-car garage, but there is a good chance that you, like me, have a great deal more than a lot of folks. We have enough that we need to pay attention what Jesus' concern on our account is.

First, we need to consider the context of these hard teachings. Luke tells us that a great crowd of people had come to Jesus to be healed of their diseases and cleansed of their evil spirits. Hundreds of hurting people surging to Jesus, trying to touch him and, guess what? He healed all of them. Apparently, he didn't ask to see their W-2's or their income tax forms. Rich, poor; deadbeat or deserving; it didn't seem to matter. He healed everybody. That says to me that Jesus' desire was for all people to be well, to be made whole. It says something about the graciousness of God that Jesus came to reveal—it is poured out on everyone. It has nothing to do with whether we have earned it and everything to do with God's good purpose. God doesn't keep a list of the good boys and girls, rewarding them with stockings full of health and wisdom and wealth, and God doesn't keep a list of the bad children, giving them lumps of coal. Rather God gives blessing to those who have no hope of claiming it, which is pretty much everyone.

Here, however, is the rub. It can be so difficult for us to trust God's goodness. Some part of us believes in God's abundant grace, but we keep wanting to make it a transaction. Our pride keeps sneaking in. We want to see the good stuff we have—health, prosperity, reputation—as God's approval of us, and worse, we want to see the other guy's misfortune, as a kind of competition in which it looks like God loves us more. A part of us can't stand the thought that our rude, lazy, no-good neighbor is also blessed by God.

But there it is. God's blessing is for everyone. Over and over in his teachings and parables, Jesus avoids depicting badness as an obstacle to blessing while steering clear of making goodness a requirement. The only ones excluded from the blessing are those who don't want it, those who don't think they need it, or those who aren't open to the possibility that they can't earn it for themselves.

Which brings us to that list of blessings and woes. If Jesus came to demonstrate God's grace, which is for everyone, then we need to look for that grace in his words. With the blessings for the poor and the hungry, for the mourning and the reviled, God's grace seems obvious. These are the people who are most likely to know they have no other option than God. Episcopal priest, Robert Farrar Capon, calls them the last, the lost, the least and the little.^{viii} These are the folks who are more likely to put their trust in God, to believe that in the midst of their pain and loss, God is still with them, the people who while appearing to be failures, still give thanks to God and claim God's blessing.

And the woes? I believe that Jesus proclaimed the woes, not to condemn, but to save us from ourselves. It is like a loving parent who tells a child not to run in the street or stick a finger in an electrical outlet, because that parent doesn't want the child to be injured or worse. Jesus knew us humans well. He knew about our desire to earn our own salvation, to want to be just a

little better than the next guy, to be Number One. And when it looks like we have accomplished that, by the world's standards, it is easy to think we don't need God's blessing. We already have our own. We are blessed with our bank accounts, our full stomachs, our good times, and our good reputations. We can be tempted to wonder what more could God possibly do for us.

And that is the danger of which Jesus warns us. For some day all of that will come to an end—the stock market crashes, a disease is diagnosed, a marriage dissolves, a child dies, our name is forgotten—and we discover that we too are among the last, the lost, the least and the little. Pay attention, he is telling us, to where you put your trust, because God's gracious blessing is the only dependable blessing there is. And that is why we can risk everything we have and are. That blessing from God cannot be taken from us even when it seems that all hell has broken loose in our lives. And it also means that we can risk our safety and security to carry out God's dream for the world on behalf of others, to speak up for justice, to feed the hungry, to help refugees, to be God's own people in the world.

Maybe there is something good to claim from these past two years of pandemic and social upheaval. Maybe it has reminded us of the fragility of the things we took for granted. Maybe it has forced us to lay aside diversions and take up new demands, consider with new eyes the condition of the world. Maybe we find ourselves hungry for something we can't quite name or grieving something we have lost. Maybe we have been pushed to ask ourselves some of those big life questions. What is the purpose of my life? What is it that I truly value? What can I rely on? If so, then maybe this is a good time to listen to Jesus, even if his words seem threatening.

So hear this, God's blessing is for all, the ones on the bottom and the ones on top. We can't earn it or buy it or deserve it. It is simply ours for the receiving. Don't let pride or wealth, abundance, good times, or popularity get in the way of that gracious gift. Loosen your grip on all that stands in the way of receiving the blessing and trust yourself to the amazing grace of God.

ⁱ Will Willimon, "Jesus Visits the Hamptons," *Sojourners*, March-April 2002, p. 36.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 1:52-53.

^{iv} Luke 12:16-21.

^v Luke 16:19-31.

^{vi} Luke 18:18-30.

^{vii} Luke 19:1-10.

^{viii} Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 510.