Luke 6:17-26

Jesus says Blessed are you who are poor. And I'm not poor.

Jesus says Blessed are you who hunger now. And I'm not hungry.

Jesus says Blessed are you when people hate you for walking my ways. And right now, I am not hated.

I know there are those among us who have been poor. So poor that you have known what it is to be hungry. I have read and heard your stories. Here, though, right now- we are not the poor of the world. Right now, we are not the hungry ones.

Oh, we might think. But I am poor compared to my neighbor. I am poor compared to people down the street, or I am totally poor compared to the billionaires running those tech companies. Comparatively, I am poorer, I tell myself. As I twist like a worm on a hook trying to make myself land in the blessed part of this passage. I suspect I am not alone. So I stop thinking about myself and I look again at what it is to be poor.

Looking at us as global citizens I notice 9% of the world live in extreme poverty (I mean people who live on less than $2 a day), and these numbers are from before Covid. The World Bank estimates that an additional 97 million people have been pushed back into extreme poverty since Covid began.

Let’s look at the roots of poverty. Extreme poverty means you cannot afford access to clean water, adequate food, safe shelter, or access to education. Which means poverty works in cycles. Suppose you cannot access sufficient water to keep you and your family healthy. In that case, your family grows up physically weak, unhealthy and unable to do any work towards improving your lot. The next generation then takes it’s turn imprisoned in a cycle of poverty. More roots of poverty are found in the misuse of power in domestic violence or state conflict. The origins of poverty are found in discrimination and racism. The only way out of extreme poverty is if someone helps you; if someone else chooses to share.

Jesus says to those in extreme poverty, be blessed.

Jesus says to those in extreme poverty, I see you. Trust that the gross inequity of the global economy is not what God wanted. Jesus says, to the poor be blessed.

Then Jesus looks at the rest of us.

Jesus looks at us

And

Jesus says woe to you who are rich, and yup, by any global standards, I am rich.

Jesus says woe to you who are well-fed, and yes, I am well-fed

Jesus says woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, and right now, many people are speaking well of me.

This passage has me hooked.

These words are uncomfortable. These words are supposed to be uncomfortable

Uncomfortable but not cruel.

In the language of scripture, ‘woe ‘is the language of lament.

Jesus can see how hard it is to give up riches. Jesus can see how challenging it is to give up power. I am comforted in knowing that woe does not mean Jesus is wishing me any troubles. Jesus is not cursing me with woe. Jesus is noticing, witnessing my struggle to give up power and money. Jesus sees my struggle and laments that giving up money is difficult. Woe.

This is a theme we can follow in the Gospel readings. Later in Luke, we also hear the story of a rich young man. Jesus invites the rich young man to come and follow him. But to do so, this rich young man needs to sell everything and give to the poor. This invitation to discipleship was not accepted. The young man was very sad, but he could not do it. And Jesus says, "Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Lk 18:25). For those who are rich, the struggle is real, and Jesus laments that it is so difficult. Woe.

And it is difficult.

Money means so much to us. I don’t mean money, like a pile of coins. The problem is that often money is so much more than a stack of bills.

Money can safety. Safe like you will never be hungry again. Money can be security.

Money can be judgement; money shows the world (especially your friends and family) that you have value.

Money can be a communication of love. If I love my children, I will be careful with my money and leave something more for them. Or, we all know the image of writing someone out of an inheritance.

Money can be pleasure, the resources to buy a good time.

Money, money money. And these are only a few of the meanings of money.

Money can influence every aspect of our day, and yet, as disciples, we hardly ever talk about it.

The first time I had an honest, faithful discussion of all that money means to me was with Salal and Cedar, the watershed discipleship community here in the Diocese of New Westminster. One of their practices of growing into faith is to have conversations about money. This is not stewardship where the church asks for money. This is an honest, non-judgmental dialogue about how we, each of us, feel about money. For example, what money means in our lives. Our meanings for money often from how our family of origin talks about or uses money. This conversation is a chance to notice and name where we are using money in faithful ways and where we are not. For me, this is an opportunity to faithfully celebrate my practice of giving and lament my shortcomings. Woe.

Anglicans can be so careful and reserved. We don't want to touch the topic of money. It isn’t polite. However, how we earn, spend, save, invest, give away money is discipleship. When we are doing discipleship earnestly, money should be a part of the conversation. If we have more money, this conversation becomes more difficult. And because it is difficult, we turn from the path. We want to look to all those who are richer than we are and wait for them to change before we make our way forward.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, very truly, I tell you, Jesus walks beside you in the journey. Jesus laments that this conversation might be a struggle, woe.

This passage tells us an uncomfortable truth. Jesus does not want extreme poverty. And yet there still is extreme poverty in the world. Jesus does not want people to go hungry. And yet, there are still hungry people in the world. To those who are weeping and those who are hated for proclaiming the Word against injustice, Jesus sees you. In this passage, the poor are blessed and invited to rest in God's peace.

Then, this is an invitation for all of us who continue to be rich (by global standards). To follow Jesus is to give to the poor. To follow Jesus is to release prisoners in the cycle of poverty. The invitation to follow Jesus includes giving up some portion of your wealth to ensure that the world is fed.

Are we called to give up everything? I do not know. I suspect each of us is called in unique ways to give in a way that is related to our gifts and capacity. And I notice, Christians have been doing this work. In 2020 9% of the world lived in extreme poverty. In 1990 30% of the world lived in extreme poverty. A lot of the work to mitigate this kind of injustice has been done, is being done by Christian organizations like PWRDF (the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund.) And here, right now, twice a month, a few of our members are going and helping at the local food bank. I send money to the Anglican Council of the North, knowing that one injustice that pulls at my heart is the poverty of the Canadian North. But I do not give everything I have.

For all of us who continue to be rich, even after contributing money to fight poverty. For us who read this passage and, in the end, choose not to sell everything and give everything to the poor. For us who are like the rich young man, Jesus has more words of comfort. Jesus tells us, "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (Lk 18:27).

This should be an uncomfortable passage for everyone who, by global standards, is rich. There is a call here to give more money. And, everyone who hears this and contributes something more towards ending poverty- together we take one step closer to the Kingdom of God. So I invite us to stay with the uncomfortable money talk. What is Jesus calling you to do? Trust this, that when you are doing what Jesus calls you to do, you will rejoice that day and leap for joy.