February 17th – 10:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

**Redemptive Blessings**

I. Critical Reading

When we hear our Scripture lesson from the Gospel of Luke this morning, many of us delight in hearing the ‘blessed are they...’ or ‘blessed are you...’ lines that often bring comfort to those who are struggling. In this particular passage, it also reminds us that to have it all, to be rich and full of material things will not serve you in the end. You would think, as a pastor, that it might be a simple, comforting Scripture to read, but it is actually one that makes my skin crawl a bit.

Now, you might be surprised, you might ask why – why would I be inclined to be uncomfortable with such a beautifully written text that provides hope to the hopeless and detriment to the wicked? Well, because when I dig in, the hard questions and realities come to the surface.

For generations, particular brothers and sisters of the faith have used these kinds of texts in a way that I find incongruent with the Christ of love and of wholeness. I feel uncomfortable to say that those who are poor, who are hungry, who weep, who are hated, who are exclude are...blessed? Blessed? Yes, God provides that they will be filled in the end, that they will be encouraged and made whole. Yet, I still have this uncomfortable feeling.

Some have used this text to bolster martyrdom, to try to make sense of a split between the rich and the poor, perhaps to make us more comfortable with that reality on Earth. Some have used this text to tell the suffering, the weeping, the hungry, and the poor – oh, it’ll be okay in the end. I think that’s a false use of this text, and if anything, a failure to acknowledge a God of love for all people at all times.

In my own theological study, when I hear the word for blessing, I change it in my mind to a word that I feel is more appropriate and more meaningful – I change the word to ‘protected.’ God protects the poor, God protects the hungry, God protects the weeping – and promises that their pain will be no more. God protects the hated, the excluded, and those who speak up for what is right in God’s name. Rejoice in that protection, rejoice that you have a God who will never stop walking and journeying with you in all the challenges that life brings.

II. Woe to You

The second portion of our text also has some fair interpretation to undergo. One could read this passage and think it is wrong to be rich, or full, or celebrate with laughter. Yet, again, that’s not the Christ we know, and I think on the surface, we have to be particularly careful how we interpret the word. The general call to those who are hearing ‘woe to you’ – is more of a call to humility.

If you are rich and do not use your money and gifts to serve others, than you’ve received your gift and that is that. If you do not look at the poor in humility, and journey alongside them, and offer up your gifts to those in need, then the blessing as such, ends. If you are full – full of life, full of food, full of everything you need – but you do not share that with those in need? Then in the end, you will be hungry -- you will feel the ache of what it looks like to not have those things that made you feel filled and whole. If you are laughing – laughing or mocking, not inviting others into the joy – then you shall find out what it means to mourn and weep – what it feels like to hurt as well.

If I could distill the text down to its very bones, it would be – God protects those who are hurting and God calls those who have gifts to share them and be humble, otherwise, they will see the shadow side of their magnificent gifts.

III. When it comes to you

When we read Scripture, we have the incredible gift of choosing the perspective in which we read the text. For most of us, myself included, it is very easy to read the text on the side of the one who is favoured. It is easy for me to sit and to read and to hear that I am protected. All those times I was bullied in school, all those times I’ve received a sharp side eye for being part of the LGBT+ community, all those times I’ve felt like the bills were overwhelming, all those times that I felt sad – God protects me, and holds me, and loves me, and I recognize myself as a blessed member of the body of Christ in this world, loved and held by a merciful God.

And all of this is true. It’s true for me, it’s true for you – no matter what we encounter, no matter the pains we see or hear or feel – God calls us by name and calls us beloved, mercifully gathering us in to embrace us in protection.

Yet, what we often don’t like to do, myself included, is to go to the shadow side – to the place where we really have to get to grips with the fact that we sometimes sit on the ‘woe to you’ side of this text. I’ve had enough and I haven’t shared, I’ve been filled with food and tea and all good things, but I haven’t gone out of my way to make sure that those who are hungry are filled. I’ve laughed and beyond self-preservation, there have been times where I have not wanted to journey with the mourning and the weeping because I’ve wanted to live in laughter – I have not wanted to face the tough stuff of life.

This isn’t a dig on me, but it’s honest and it’s vulnerable, and I have the distinct feeling that I’m not alone. I’ve walked past people that I should have stopped next to and lifted up and I’m not proud of that. I don’t hold myself in a space of guilt or self-loathing, but I admit before you all that I’m not perfect and chances are, you’re not either. And again, this isn’t a dig on you too. But it’s time to seek redemption – it’s time to acknowledge and confess our shortcomings, to name our sin, and to admit that we are called to do better. It is a time to read the text from the uncomfortable perspective – to say that we are called to humility and kindness and to sharing our gifts and sometimes we fall short of that. And God, again and again, calls us back into love and mercy and grace and says ‘you are worthy’ and places us back on the path of protection and increases our faith.

To read this text, truthfully and meaningfully, we must read it from both sides of the page.

IV. A community that comes together

Often we talk about the ‘Sermon the Mount’ – but this is what Luke calls ‘the Sermon on the Plain.” Rather than the 107 verses of the Sermon on the Mount, the whole sermon on the Plain is a mere 32 verses. It gets to the point – to the call of discipleship, to the call of a more blended and beautiful community where values and gifts are shared, and a raw, unvarnished declaration that God’s realm looks far from what we perceive of the world’s priorities.

Today, I challenge you to read the text from both sides – from a side of blessing and protection and a place where you are called to account for a lack of humility and sharing of gifts. I challenge you to dig in deeper in the word, to be honest, to be vulnerable, because these words were not only written for the disciples of the day, but for this community in 2019. May we, together, embrace the call to discipleship, the call to humility, and the call to love where all are equal on the Plain as God’s beloved children called to serve the world in God’s name. Amen.