

Turned Upside Down
A Sermon for Every Sunday
The Sixth Sunday of Epiphany, Year C
Father Michael Renninger
Luke 6:17-26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

Jason had just returned from Haiti. He is an emergency room doctor, and he went to Haiti with some other physicians to assist after the earthquake in 2010.

You may remember that horrible event. A massive earthquake hit that poor island nation, and well over 300,000 people died. Hundreds of thousands more were homeless or injured.

For about a week, Jason practiced what he called 'primitive medicine,' facing broken bones, infections and grave injuries with a minimum of medical supplies, and no modern equipment.

He delivered a set of premature twins in a muddy tent. They both died. Jason said, "If these children had been born in the poorest hospital in America, they would have been saved. But, in Haiti, everything is turned upside down."

As I concluded my conversation with Jason, he said to me, "What I saw in Haiti has changed my life. Because, when you see people whose lives have been turned upside down...you start to ask questions about what is really important in life."

In the first chapters of Luke's Gospel, Jesus stays busy, doing very important things at the start of his public ministry. Following his baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus faces the devil's temptations in the desert. He preaches in his home town (and does not get a warm welcome there!). He cures the sick, calls his first disciples, preaches good news, engages in debates with religious authorities.

And, having gone UP the mountain to call and name his 12 apostles, he then comes DOWN the slope. And, on a level stretch of land, he begins to preach again.

And this time, Jesus preaches a message which is intended to turn the world upside down. We hear part of that world changing sermon today. We call this section of his sermon the Beatitudes. That word – Beatitude – comes from the Latin word “beatus,” which means blessed, truly happy, deeply fulfilled.

We've heard the Beatitudes often. Matthew and Luke both recount these words of Jesus. Even non-believers are familiar with the fact that Jesus said something like, “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

We are familiar with these words of Jesus. But despite our best efforts to sugar-coat and tame these Beatitudes, they still have the power to turn our world upside down, if we dare to listen to them, dare to live them.

How would YOUR life change, today, if you really believed Jesus when he says: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now...blessed are you who weep...blessed are you when people hate you.”

Perhaps even more challenging is this question: How would your world be turned upside down, right now, if you dared to listen to Jesus when he said, “Woe to you who

are rich... woe to you who are filled now... woe to you who laugh now... woe to you when everyone speaks well of you..."

When Jesus first preached these words, the Beatitudes overturned a thousand years' worth of some people's piety. There was a strain of Jewish piety which believed that wealth, health and power were all signs that God loved you (Come to think of it, that ancient Jewish piety may be alive and well in some modern Christian preaching as well!) There were people, at the time of Jesus, who were convinced that sickness, suffering and poverty were all signs that you had disappointed God somehow.

But as Jesus preaches these Beatitudes, he's overturning some important assumption that his contemporaries had about who God is, and how God works.

You can just picture the folks in that vast crowd, scratching their heads and saying, "Did I hear him right? Did he say that the poor are blessed? I thought poverty was God's punishment for laziness!

Did I hear him right? Did he say Woe to the rich? I thought prosperity was sign of God's favor toward me!

Did I hear him say 'woe to you' who are full? I thought that God's abundance on my table was a sign that I was abundantly blessed by a God I had pleased!"

And yet, they DID hear him right. Jesus knew what he was saying. And He knew that his words would turn the world upside down... if anyone would listen.

And, if anyone is listening, his words COULD have the same effect today. Yet, for the most part, many of us still worship at the altars of power, money, control, and instant gratification. We want it all – we want it now – we want it the way we want it!

Then along comes Jesus, quietly happy to turn our world upside down, insisting that it is the poor, not the prosperous, who inherit the kingdom; it is the weeping, not the wealthy, who hold a special place in God's heart; it is the hungry, not 'the beautiful people,' who find real satisfaction; it is the sick, the sinner, the outcast who find a home in God – and the self-righteous, the self-satisfied, the self-indulgent who must wander in the desert of disconnection.

Why would Jesus stand on flat ground and preach things that turn our world upside down? Well, on one level, I think he really, really wants to get our attention!

My friend Jason went to Haiti, and the dramatic things he saw and experienced there caused him to re-think his priorities. In the Gospel, that crowd of folks came from the surrounding villages and towns, and somewhere near the Sea of Galilee, they SAW Jesus, and HEARD his dramatic preaching of the truth.

The Beatitudes of Jesus call Christians to think, and think hard, about what is really worth doing in life. The Beatitudes are the revelation of some of God's dearest priorities.

Could Jesus be any more forthright in telling us what is truly important? He says, "Woe to you – woe to you if you are spending your life chasing wealth. Woe to you if a full belly and full bank account have highest priority in your life.

"Woe to you if you have worked tirelessly to avoid the pain, the need, the injustice, which afflicts your neighbor. A life focused on consuming, having, hoarding, is a life NOT worth living!

But blessed... blessed are you who embrace the poverty of Christ – the poverty which allowed him to pour out everything for those he loved. Blessed are you, when you

know the deep hunger of your own heart – the hunger for God – a hunger which leads you to feed your hungry neighbor.

Blessed are you when people hate you because of WHAT you stand for and WHO you stand for. Blessed are you when people know that you're a Christian, not just through your words, but through your deeds. Blessed are you – blessed are you because you stood up for the truth, and that standing for truth cost you something. You COULD avoid all of this by simply keeping quiet and getting along. But blessed are you who will not compromise when it comes to the Gospel.

Blessed are you when you weep – when you weep over the suffering of your friend; when you weep over the violence between nations; when you weep over the violence done to the unborn, the lack of welcome for the stranger or refugee, the injustice which masquerades as ‘life in the real world.’”

Blessed are you when you weep – because, after all, Jesus wept when his dear friend Lazarus died... and anything that makes us more like Jesus is, by definition, a blessing.

And, in the end, isn't that the whole point? You and I, as baptized believers, are called to live a Christ-like life. We are called and empowered by the Spirit to become more and more like Christ.

The Beatitudes are a blessing, because those who seek to live them become more like Christ: the Christ who was poor, the Christ who wept, the Christ who hungered, the Christ who was persecuted. The Christ whose bold proclamation unleashed the Kingdom here and now.

So, blessed are you, Jason, you emergency room doctor. You went to Haiti and you wept. You experienced the poverty of those people. You went to bed hungry after a long day of hard medicine, and you came back home hungry to help. Blessed are you Jason, because you let Christ turn your world upside down, and now your priorities are more and more the priorities of Christ.

Woe to us who miss this message. Blessed are we who hear, and believe, and act.

—*Michael Renninger* © 2019