

Uncomfortable Words

Luke 6:17-26
February 11, 2007

I.

Many of you might remember the catchy little song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" by Bobby McFerrin. It won the Grammy Award for "Best Song of the Year" in 1989. The lyrics urged us to live for the moment, be laid back, focus on ourselves, and just take things as they come.

If we took that song literally we probably wouldn't be here this morning. We might be sleeping in, reading the paper, having brunch, doing any number of things other than worshipping God, praising him, and offering our thanksgivings for all he has done for us.

If we took that song literally we probably would be thinking about the pleasures of this world. The hope that Jesus gives us for the next world could be the furthest thing from our minds.

Don't worry, be happy. How come we don't hear Gospel readings like that? Why do our readings from Scripture seem at times to be so difficult? Why do we come here on Sunday mornings and hear things that are challenging; things that are thought provoking?

Look at today's Gospel. Four blessings and four warnings. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated by others. And warnings to the rich, and those who are full. Warnings to people who are laughing, and those about whom others speak well.

What is that all about? Where do we fit into that picture? Well, we probably feel pretty secure and well-off. At first glance, we might not think we are the people Jesus was blessing. Many of us might think that we're more like those who will experience the woes.

But that would be a superficial reading of today's Gospel. It's not just a simple passage from Scripture. It's complex, and full of meaning for the people of Jesus' time, as well as for us today.

II.

An important part of Jesus' teaching today involved blessings. What exactly are blessings? Are blessings equivalent to happiness, for example? Perhaps they are in some cases, but certainly not in today's reading. Here, the ideas of blessings and happiness can convey entirely different meanings.

Jesus said blessed are the poor, and the hungry, and those who weep. He did not say happy are the poor, happy are the hungry, and happy are those who weep. That would have been unrealistic. People who are poor, hungry, and weeping probably are not very happy.

In fact, the emotion of happiness might more easily be attributed to those whom Jesus denounced. He said woe to the rich, the full, and to those who are laughing. But those are the people who in our way of thinking are likely to be happy, aren't they?

So, blessings are something else. In thinking about blessings I recall the story of the Baptist preacher at the race track. One day he noticed that a Catholic priest had stepped out on the track and blessed the forehead of a horse in the gate. And then the horse, which was a real long shot, won the race. The priest did the same thing before the next several races, and the horse that was blessed always finished first.

Then the old preacher noticed that just before the last race the priest went out and not only blessed one of the horses on the forehead, but also on its eyes, ears, mane, and hooves. This

was just too much, and so the preacher went to one of the windows and bet everything he had on that horse.

Well, the horse finished last, and then dropped dead just beyond the finish line. The preacher ran over to the priest and asked, "what happened Father? All day you have blessed horses and they won, and now the horse you blessed lost and I lost a lot of money.

The priest nodded wisely and said, "that's one of the problems with you Protestants. You can't tell the difference between a blessing and Last Rites."

One of the points of that story is that a blessing signifies something important. We might start with the reality that blessings create something. They actually place into effect that which they declare. God's favor is continually swirling about us, and a blessing reaches out and grabs some of that favor for us.

An example that might explain how this works is the marriage ceremony where the priest says "I now pronounce you husband and wife." They are not husband and wife before he says it, and they are husband and wife after he says it. The words themselves call something into being. The words actually create the marital status.

Blessings are similar. Like the wedding ceremony they actually call something into existence. The same is true for the warnings. People ignore them at their peril. As a result, Jesus proclaimed and bestowed God's favor on those who were blessed, and he raised the threat of God's judgment on those who were warned.

III.

So, this is serious stuff. It is not to be taken lightly. And that means that we really have to understand what Jesus was doing, and the context in which he was doing it.

Today's Gospel from Luke sometimes is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain because it tells us that Jesus came down and stood on a level place. It is very similar to the more well-known Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus probably used the same material on a number of occasions as he traveled around teaching and preaching, and each Gospel writer probably just reported different occasions on which Jesus delivered essentially similar messages.

And an important starting point is to recognize that nowhere in either Gospel did Jesus condemn wealth, and nowhere in either Gospel did he glorify poverty. He recognized that wealth and poverty contain their own dangers. Wealth has the potential to cause people to become self-absorbed and prideful with their own possessions, and poverty can cause people to grow bitter with envy and to become covetous.

And Jesus certainly did not call for the wholesale transfer of property from prideful and self-absorbed rich people to envious and covetous poor people. His message was far deeper than that, both for the rich and the poor.

Jesus blessed those who were living in poverty, hunger, and oppression not because it was good, but because it was not God's will for them. Jews in first century Palestine existed under brutal Roman domination with little hope for anything different, and Jesus offered them hope.

Then, on the other side of coin, Jesus denounced the way in which wealth can corrupt and separate people from God. He specifically had in mind the rich who failed to even recognize the poor who were living right outside their gates. He proclaimed woes on the rich not just because they were wealthy, but because they chose personal gratification over using their wealth in service to God.

These ideas of wealth and poverty pervade the Gospels. The story of Lazarus and the rich man clearly makes the point. We will read that story later in the summer.

And in Matthew's Gospel we recall the well-known story of how on the day of Judgment our Lord will separate people into the metaphorical categories of sheep and goats. You probably have heard it before, and the point of that story is that God's favor comes from caring for the needy, the poor, and those without basic necessities.

It is very difficult to read the Bible, and to take it seriously, and to then think only of ourselves. Everywhere you turn you encounter God's call to reach out to others, to help those in need, to share the blessings of our own material goods with those who have nothing.

IV.

So, what should we do? Because this subject is so prevalent in the Bible, you have heard me talk about it before. A few months ago I marveled at how one of the fastest growing service industries in America is self-storage. And I don't need to go into that again other than to say that if everybody in America would sell ten percent of what they have in self-storage and give the money to the poor and needy, our charitable organizations would be overwhelmed.

In a little less than two weeks the Season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. Many of us will develop a Lenten discipline concerning something we will do or stop doing. Some of us will do it as a way to deepen our relationship with the Lord. Others will focus on something that might not be spiritual but that is good for us. For me, losing weight comes to mind.

And many of us will hope that our Lenten discipline, whatever it is, might be something that we will continue after Easter, or that in some way might lead us to achieve goals to which we aspire but have not yet reached.

But Lent is not just about individual disciplines. What about the church's Lenten discipline? What will St. Thomas do or stop doing as it seeks to live into its responsibilities to you and to the community as part of the Body of Christ?

These are important questions for us individually and as the church, and we are called to come up with honest answers as we consider where we fit in today's Gospel reading. Suppose Jesus were standing here today, and suppose that he would look at each of us, and then look at the church, and proclaim some blessings and some woes. What would he say?

I'm not going to make any predictions about that right now, and instead I would just ask us all to think about what it means to be secure and well-off. Think about what it is like to be reasonably comfortable, to be able to do pretty much what we want and live the lives we have planned for ourselves even in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Then I would ask us to think about the people on the Mississippi coast, and here in Hancock County, who don't have what we have, and who live from day to day, from meal to meal, and from shelter to shelter. And in many cases these are people with young children for whom hope in the future is not even a meaningful concept.

And after having thought not only about ourselves but also about others, I would urge us, during this period of Lent that soon will be here, to fearlessly take an inventory of our lives and what we do with ourselves, our time, and our resources, and then answer that question about what Jesus would say.

V.

Blessed are the poor and the needy and those who weep. Woe to the rich and the prideful and the self-absorbed. If we think about it we probably have some idea of where we stand.

And we know that this is not something we can just get around to later. We know that we are not called to care for others on a one-time basis just to get our tickets punched. We are called to a way of life, to a discipline, and to a daily routine of being what God wants us to be.

Some of us can invest our time and energy in that work. Others of us may not be able to do that any more, and look to our church to do it for us. That's fine. It's one of the reasons the church is here.

But at the end of the day we all know that we have been reasonably successful in our lives, and now we look behind that and ask ourselves if we have been equally faithful. I pray that we can always find, in whatever ways work for each of us, the will and the commitment to extend ourselves in God's love to others, and to bring them some measure of comfort in a broken world. *Amen.*