

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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So it begins.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. “ (Luke 6:20)

Jesus called his disciples, but the calling of the twelve was not the beginning of discipleship. Jesus had many more followers than the 12 apostles. But the question at issue is how things should continue now. With the new people of Israel? And the answer is through a revolution.

And I know, we saw a lot of Revolutions though history. But Jesus revolution is different. We see first,

- the expansion of the kingdom;
- second, the revolution of the kingdom;
- and third, the power of the kingdom.

First of all this begs the question, how do kingdoms spread? If we look at the history of mankind, the answer is obvious. Virtually all nations and empires do it by force: e.g. by military conquest. In fact, there is no empire in this world that has not established itself through some form of bloodshed.

But what about Jesus' kingdom then? I said he did it different. Right?! Jesus comes down the mountain with his disciples. In verses 17 and 18 we read: “[Jesus] came down with [the twelve] and stood on a level place,

with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.” People who were afflicted by demons also came. Jesus healed them. And in verse 19 we read: ¹⁹ “And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.” In these verses, we learn that Jesus did two things to spread his kingdom: **He preached, and he healed.** These two things happened hand in hand. Preaching and healing were inseparable.

Every church that sees itself as part of this kingdom of Jesus has two callings that are inextricably linked: to preach the gospel and to care for those in need. When we read the book of Acts and the letters in the New Testament, we see how the early church uncompromisingly did both. We see the same thing in the further course of church history. To give just one example: many orphanages, actually the majority, were built by Christians. For all these preachers, caring for the poor was the most natural thing in the world.

Okay it is nice to talk about the past, you might think now. But what are the needs of our time that we as a church should take care of? Where do we see neediness around us? What can we do to alleviate poverty in our surroundings?

Preaching and compassion belong together. And where both happen, the kingdom of God will spread in one way or another.

In verse 20, Jesus begins a long speech.

Apart from that, the speech that Jesus gives is really absolutely outrageous. Jesus' words show how revolutionary and how unique the kingdom of God

is. Jesus' speech turns everything we know on its head. Jesus says: "Blessed are you poor."

The blessedness spoken of here could be understood as the definition of who is a winner. The winners are the poor. We could also translate the word "blessed" as "happy". Happy are the poor; happy are the hungry; happy are the weepers; happy are those who are hated, shunned and reviled. It's pretty much the exact opposite of what the world says. Isn't it?

The world we live in operates on a completely different principle.

The winners are those who are rich enough to be able to afford a comfortable life. Because this is the case, people are prepared to pull out their elbows and sometimes literally walk over dead bodies in order to have a job that pays well.

The winners are those who are not hungry, i.e. who do not have to suffer from want. The winners are the ones who are laughing now; the laughter we are talking about here is the gleeful joy of those who have just scored a victory. The winners are those who are recognized, who are respected, who are admired. Even the biggest abominations still want to be loved.

Jesus is not threatening judgment here. But Jesus says that the real losers are the rich, the saturated, the triumphant and the respected. The question is of course: what is Jesus talking about here? What does Jesus mean by this? How is this to be understood? I think it is first helpful to note what Jesus did not mean. Jesus did not mean that poverty, hunger, grief, marginalization are good things in and of themselves. To be very explicit: poverty, hunger, grief and marginalization are extremely bad things. They are the

consequences of a broken, fractured world. Every single one is the consequence of sin: unjust, unfair distribution, social injustice, corruption, exploitation,

What Jesus also did not mean is the following: Christians do not need to actively seek out this kind of suffering. Here comes the transfer to today's text. The reason why the hungry are happy is because Jesus promises a time when they will be filled. The reason why those who weep are happy is because Psalm 30:6 says: "Even if you weep in the evening, you will rejoice in the morning." The reason why the persecuted are happy is that their reward in heaven is great.

And the reason why the poor are the winners is because the kingdom of God belongs to them. In other words, all the suffering we experience is only temporary. At the end of a very short life, relatively speaking, comes the resurrection and eternal life. God wants to give us a glory that makes all the pain we experience here fade away.

So what is the difference between the needy and the wealthy in the text? The wealthy rely on their wealth, on their bank account, on their abilities. That is what defines their identity. The needy have practically nothing that defines their identity. They have nothing to rely on. They have nothing except God himself. And that is why God is their everything. Times of suffering are times when what we trust in; what we build on; what our primary identity is, is revealed.

What do you live for? When everything we have is taken away, what do we have left? Someone once said this: I didn't know that Jesus was all I needed until Jesus was all I had. Is that our experience too?

At the beginning I said that every empire and every nation on earth asserts itself through military force: be it through wars and conflicts or even just the threat of violence. Jesus' kingdom is very different. Jesus' kingdom spreads through proclaiming the good news and healing the needy. And we have seen that Jesus' kingdom is radically different, revolutionary: the losers are the real winners, and the winners are the real losers; the bottom is up; and the top is down.

And that is the answer. In Jesus we find a power that can heal us all. We find in Jesus a power that can heal the whole world and make it right again. Jesus is the source.

Jesus' love for us is so infinitely great that he paid for us with his life. And it is precisely this love that is the strength and power of Jesus' new kingdom. The revolution has begun.