

“Jesus the Teacher”

This is the sixth and final Sunday in the Season of Epiphany ... a time of manifestation of the identity of the “babe in the manger. We have met Jesus the healer, Jesus the preacher, and today we meet Jesus the teacher. During these past weeks, Jesus has called and made disciples, some of whom “left everything and followed him.” For these disciples being with Jesus has been a time of preparation. Today’s gospel lesson indicates that from among these disciples, after a night of prayer on the mountain, Jesus chooses (selected) twelve to be apostles ... that is twelve to be sent out as his representatives. Why Jesus chose twelve apostles is instructional and important, because Jesus still wants and needs disciples and apostles for the same reasons.

The emphasis here is on the importance of relationships. Jesus surrounded himself with lots of people. He chose them to be his friends ... to assist him in ministry ... and to continue his work when he is gone. Jesus was fully aware that his end was near. We may be surprised that Jesus needed human friendship since he had God for a Father. If Jesus lived today, he might have written a book that would have carried his teachings around the world. But living when he did, Jesus instead chose disciples and apostles that he might write his message on their hearts, their minds ... their souls. Jesus’ disciples were to be his *living* books. They were to accompany Jesus everywhere in order to absorb his teachings and his ways. When the time came hopefully they would be ready to take the gospel message to all people. I can say with confidence, as well as with reverence that the very essence of the Christian faith is that God is not happy unless God is in relationship with people.

The word “disciple” means “learner.” Jesus chose an inner circle of twelve from his disciples, because these twelve were to be the ones who were always learning more and more about him. A Christian is a person whose whole life is spent learning about the Lord whom he or she will some day meet face to face and will then “know even as they are known.” Jesus chose from his disciples an inner core to be his apostles. Jesus named them apostles because an apostle means “someone who is sent out.” These special twelve were Jesus’ vanguard, his ambassadors to all people.

One Sunday, a little girl received a lesson on discipleship ... about being an example. Children, as you know, often hear things differently. When she got home, she told her parents that she had learned about Jesus’ samples. In some way, she got the real meaning of a disciple. A disciple is like an ambassador. Ambassadors are people, who in a foreign land represent their country. They are the “samples” of their country. As Christians, we are always sent to be ambassadors for Christ, a “sample” of Jesus ... not only by our words, but by our deeds ... by how we live our life.

There are two particular things I want to say about the Twelve that are relevant to us. First, these Twelve were ordinary people. They were not wealthy, not famous, and not influential ... they had no special education ... they were common folk. It is as if Jesus said: “Give me twelve ordinary people and I will change the world.” The work of Jesus is not in the hands of people whom the world considers great, but in the hands of ordinary people like yourselves. Second, these Twelve were a strange mixture. Take Matthew and Simon. Matthew was a tax-collector, and therefore, a traitor and a renegade. Simon was a Zealot, and the Zealots were fanatical nationalists, who were sworn to assassinate every traitor and every Roman they could find.

Only by the miracle of the power of Christ, could Matthew the tax-collector and Simon the Zealot live at peace in close company within this apostolic band of brothers. When people are really Christian ... the most diverse and divergent types can live at peace together. In Christ we can solve the problem of living together, because even the most opposite people may be united in their love for Jesus Christ. If we really love him, we will also love each other.

The second half of today’s lesson is a series of grenades. Following Jesus’ call to discipleship and appointment of apostles comes four blessings and four woes: poor-rich, hungry-full, weeping-laughing, and rejected-accepted. These are not like Matthew’s *Beatitudes*. Matthew’s Beatitudes are nine blessings and no woes. We have heard the Beatitudes so often that we have forgotten how revolutionary they are. They are not laws or wise sayings. Each “beatitude” is a challenge. As a whole, beatitudes take the standard, accepted values of this world, and turn them upside down. We are challenged, because the beatitudes address secular values that offer false happiness. In fact, what we learn here is that God effects a reversal of human values ... literally we worship a God who turns everything upside down. The people whom Jesus calls happy the world calls wretched ... the people Jesus calls wretched, the world calls happy. Happy are the hungry ... Woe to the gluttons! By teaching this way, Jesus’ objective is to put an end to world’s values that run contrary to what God values.

Such a lesson from Jesus, reminds me of the wonder and mystery of the pineapple upside-down cake. I remember sitting in my grandmother’s kitchen watching her unearth the huge, old, cast-iron skillet and rummaging through the shelves for the pineapple rings, pecan halves and other ingredients. I would sit and watch as she crumbled and browned the sugar in the old skillet, carefully arranging the fruit and nuts on top. Then she would set the skillet on the counter to cool slightly while she mixed the batter for the cake. I remember asking her why the fruit went on the bottom.

She said, “Well, the bottom is really the top. It just doesn’t look like it yet. Just wait until the timer goes off,” as she put the skill in the oven. So I waited. Then with one swift movement and the simple word “See”, grandma would turn the cake out of

the skillet onto the cake plate. Everything that had been on the bottom was now on the top as she promised. The wonderful sweet juices would melt down into the plain yellow cake. Yummy! Grandma sure could bake and pineapple upside-down cake was her best!

Blessed are you that are poor --- cursed are you that are rich! ... Blessed are you that are hungry --- cursed are you that are full! ... Blessed are you that are crying --- cursed are you that are laughing! ... Blessed are you that are rejected --- cursed are you that are accepted! Now there is an upside-down theological cake!! But before you gag, listen to what I learned about the meanings behind the words "blessing" and "woe." The main difference between Matthew's and Luke *Beatitudes* lies in cause and effect.

From Luke's perspective, Jesus' intent is to challenge the understanding of the life of blessing and the life of woe as being the result of particular behavior. Luke does not see the blessings and woes as a prescription for how or how not to have a happy life, or as the result of proper or improper behavior. Instead, for Luke, the blessings and the woes describe the way things are and will be in the kingdom of God. They are a depiction of the way God views things and the promises God makes. As one commentator writes: *They are an intimate glimpse into God's reality and nature as one who views creation in radically different ways from the dominant values of society.* The Beatitudes answer the question, "Who are you to us, God?" They reveal a God of reversals ... God who intends to turn things upside down. What seems like the bottom is really the top, and the top ... really the bottom.

I believe Luke chose his words carefully. To say one was blessed meant that whatever was happening ... good or bad ... was cause for congratulations. For Luke, it was quite possible to be blessed and to feel pain ... to be cursed and to experience pleasure. Conversely, a woe was a lament over someone's plight. Neither statement of blessing or woe refers to emotions of happiness or misery. For Luke, blessings and woes referred to the values of God with regard to the circumstances of people. We have a picture of Jesus saying that, as far as God is concerned, we are to be congratulated when we are poor, hungry, weeping and rejected. We are to be lamented over when we are rich, full, laughing, and admired. This is a picture of a God who turns everything upside down.

Actually, this lesson is not hard to understand. Our life experiences teach us this truth. Stop and think about it ... is it not in times of our greatest pain that we search the hardest for God and find our greatest favor with God? When expectations of how life ought to be are left wanting, is it not then we experience the closeness of God? Is it not when we have struggled the hardest ... fought adversity the longest ... died a little --- that God blesses us with the gift of His intimate presences ... His strength ... His life? You know and I know that when the world has turned us upside down ... we more often than not find our heads bowed, our minds searching, and our hearts hoping. We know that during the times of tribulations, when our economic, material, emotional, and social resources are low, we are more attuned to the blessings of God! During those times of trial, we thank God the most for being our Lord in the chaos ... our Lord in the storm!!

Conversely, when we think we have it all ... when we think we have "arrived," we are most in danger of turning from God's presence. When we are laughing and rich and full and popular, there is little room in us for God's favor and presence. One author writes: *During these times God laments over us because God knows that the human values obtained from prosperity prevent us from realizing God's presences and nature. God is totally unmoved by the values of accumulation, acclamation, and pleasure because they are like walls we build between ourselves and God.*

When we are rich and full and happy and satisfied, we rarely have a sense of needing God or caring about being a disciple. That is why these things are curses and the others our blessings. One set, poor, hungry, grieving, and rejected bring us close to God. The other set, rich, full, happy and popular lead us away from God. In reality, it is better for us to be in a position where we seek after God and experience God's presence, then to be in a position where we give God no consideration.

Luke's *Beatitudes* challenge us to examine and reflect upon the values of our faith and life. Will we take the easy way which yields immediate pleasure and profit, or will we take the hard way that yields immediate labor and sometimes suffering? Will we seize on the pleasure and the profit of the moment, or are we willing to look ahead and sacrifice them for the greater good? Will we concentrate on the world's rewards, or will we concentrate on Christ? If we adopt the world's ways, we abandon the values of Christ. If we accept Christ's way, we must abandon the values of this world. G. K. Chesterton, who principles constantly got him into trouble, once said, "I like getting into hot water. It keeps you clean!" The challenge of the *Beatitudes* is plain: "Will we choose to be happy in the world's way, or in Christ's way?" It's that simple ... and yet, so very profound ... so very eternal in the answer!