

## **“Doing Unto Others”**

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, November 6, 2016  
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
All Saints' Sunday**

**Readings from scripture: Ephesians 1:11-23 and Luke 6:20-31**

*In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.*

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

*Ephesians 1:11-23*

*Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

*“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”*

*Luke 6:20-31*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that we carry within, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from sacred scripture, and the words and images that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ, the word of hope and peace and forgiveness and love. And may that word do its work within us, among us and through us into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in the faithful name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

Are you rich? Woe to you. Are you full now? Not hungry at all? Woe to you. Are you laughing and happy and filled with joy and content with your life? Woe to you. Do people like you and speak well of you? Do you have friends who care for you? Woe to you. Are you poor? Blessed are you. Are you hungry and wondering what your next meal will be or where it will come from? Blessed are you. Are you weeping with sorrow? Blessed are you. And do people hate you and exclude you and revile you and defame you and don't want you around, and talk about you behind your back and generally avoid you on the street or at work or in the store—they want nothing to do with you at all? Blessed are you, says Jesus Christ our Lord.

I don't know about you or your life or your reflection on this gospel passage or how it engages you today, but for me, I stand before you convicted as one who feels rich enough, full enough, filled with enough joy to occasionally laugh and hope, for the most part, that people speak well of me. The last one, I'm not so sure about, so maybe there is a little blessing somewhere, but there is a lot of woe to you. What do we do with this passage that seems so clearly to set blessing upon the poor and woe or curse or watch out upon the rich? What are we to do who eat whatever we want because we can afford to go to the store and buy our heart's desire? Woe to us who do that but blessed are those who are hungry and not sure where their next meal will come from. Again and again Jesus lays these opposite paradigms out and says blessed is this and woe is that and—oh, my goodness, where are we? For many of us, I think, find ourselves being addressed, at least in this first part of the passage, by Jesus saying “woe to you”.

As I was sitting with this passage and the tension between blessings and woe, an image came to me. To be honest it's probably a projection of myself in this image, but the image that came was of a young man swimming through salt water, struggling out in the middle of the ocean with waves crashing, foam and water getting in his mouth. He is struggling to stay above the water. His legs are tangled with a net. He is kicking as hard as he can just to stay afloat—just to make it. He is struggling stroke after stroke. He is hoping he can make it to shore which he knows has to be out in front of him. He is praying to himself, *Lord Jesus, help me, help me, Lord, help me*. Stroke after stroke, water in the mouth, feet flailing and wrapping more and more in a rope or a net. And finally at long last, one hand makes a stroke and touches sand. The young man thinks to himself, *I've made it!* Exhausted with water coming out of his mouth, he crawls his way up the sand making it firm enough and high enough where he can sit down and untangle his feet. He looks back over the vast ocean, surprised that he could ever make it this far and be okay. The rope now beside him, with a sense of exhausted accomplishment, he stands up. He sees the distance that he has traveled, the struggle with sin in his life. He thinks that he has finally made it to the safe part. He turns around thinking that now that he's made it this far, surely the road ahead will be easier and the way will be clear. And right as he turns around to look where he is going in the future, there is a gigantic billboard that says “Woe to you who have made it this far.”

What on earth is Jesus trying to do? By telling us that it is a problem to be rich and full and laughing and be well-respected. I know many people who have spent a long part of their life trying to be formed into the image of Christ; trying to work through all their struggles and problems in order to simply be a good person. And when we get there, we hear this from our Lord? And as I sat listening to this unbelievable gospel passage of woe, woe, woe directed at so many of who we are—in the midst of wondering what God is up to in this passage for this day, I heard the voice of Mary at the tomb say to the gardener, “Teacher.” And when that word “teacher” came into my awareness, it finally dawned on me—Jesus is not being proscriptive about riches or hunger or laughing or having a good reputation or being poor or hungry or weeping or having people hate you—he is trying to teach us in the way of a good rabbi. Paint the extremes as far apart as possible and let the people in the middle decide—where do I stand?

Where do you stand between poverty and riches, between hunger and being full, between weeping and laughing, between people hating you and people loving you? Where do you stand? The difference, to me, is that those that are poor or hungry or weeping or who don't have anyone who likes them and who feel like they are swimming and struggling and not getting ahead or drowning because of their sin—those people realize they need help. And often, too often, if we think of ourselves as rich or satisfied or laughing or joyful or well thought of, we think, “Hmmm. Look what I've done.” Instead of “Look what God has done through me.” I think the invitation for us is to realize that in the dynamic of this tension in the beginning of this passage, the invitation of the teacher is for us to realize that we never, ever, ever want to lose that sense that God is at work with us and through us. It is God who takes our poverty and turns it into riches, our hunger into fullness, our weeping into joy, our misfortune into a blessing. If we stand in that blessed side, we are realizing that we are being companioned through the journey of life and that God's presence is going with us. We stand in a place of humility, naked before a loving God and saying, “Lord, here I am” instead of standing far off, alone, arrogant, I've done it myself—the Pharisee who says, “Thank God I'm not like everybody else.”

The teacher is setting up the spectrum and he is leading us from poverty, to hunger, to weeping, to how people think of us, and he wants us, then, to come to this final part, fully aware that we need God's presence to go with us. We need to be humble and open to God's loving care coursing through our being, because here is what the Lord desires for each of us. I think it's a beautiful message in light of where we are as a nation on the cusp of an election, in a world that is broken and needs help. Jesus says to each of us, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” We cannot do this on our own, but only with the presence of God working with us. He goes on to say that “if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and anyone who takes away your coat give them even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you—everyone—every cardboard sign that you see at every intersection that you stop at—everyone. Give to everyone who begs from you. And if anyone takes what is yours, do not ask for it in return.” The last part is probably one of the most famous lines in scripture and one of the lines that most people who have never even come into a church know: the golden rule. But what's important as we have journeyed from the beginning blessing to this point is to realize that it is only with God's power that we are able to fulfill this last sentence. The golden rule of how it is that we are to live our lives, how we are to treat others, how we are to love God and serve our neighbors. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” It doesn't get any simpler than that, but it also doesn't get any harder. Amen.