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Luke 6:17-26
Follow Jesus How?

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Luke 6:17-26 New Revised Standard Version

Jesus 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. “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.

 In the Netherlands there is an obscure Dutch law that forbids the police from interrupting church services. You might have seen in the news that there was a Dutch church that had a non-stop vigil for 96 days. There were over 1,000 pastors and priests involved and it was the longest religious ceremony ever recorded, but for those more than three months, the Christian Church did what we are supposed to do. A vulnerable family was protected. A spokesman for the refugee family that was seeking shelter in the church said that it was a new way of being a church – a new way of having an impact on society, a new way of standing up for vulnerable people.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 When Jesus said the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed, he was proclaiming his mission. It is our mission as well because it begins with Jesus and continues with you and me.

Last week we heard the story of the disciples being called to follow Jesus and this week I want us to think about how we can follow Jesus today. I have to tell you it is hard. The way that our world is today, none of us really wants to be on the same level. Having to stand on the same level as those whom we have deemed less-than or even more-than is almost too much to imagine, too much to bear, and, at the end of the day, it is not how our world works.[[2]](#footnote-2) In our world we raise up the popular, the important, those people that we think are better. And when we are on the mountaintop, we like the view from up there! We assume that the view is much better from up above because there is nothing restricting your view. There is nothing standing in your way of seeing what you want to see. Even when we feel like we are on the valley down below, we like the idea that we can get to the mountaintop. We much prefer to have that hope than to have the option that everyone in the world is on the same level.[[3]](#footnote-3)

So much of our perspective has been decided by our society, by our culture. We have these biases that say that there are some people that we can look down upon. That some people are less than. It is easier to look up, or down, rather than looking sideways, around us, beside us, or in front of us. As Christians we are called to stand on the level plains, not to stand on the mountaintops and not to wallow in the valleys. We are not used to being on an equal level with others. That’s why we have those bumper stickers that say, “My kid is an honor student.” That’s why we go to the movie theater and the seats are on an incline. When you are level with everyone else, you have to stand on your tippy toes to see. Things and people are in your way. When I was in school, I wanted to sit in the front of the class so that I wouldn’t have to try to see over someone’s head or around someone’s head. Being a Christian is like when you take your classroom photo for the yearbook and they make people stand in between the bodies of other people so that you can see everyone’s face. Everyone is honored, everyone is valued, everyone is loved.

Jesus doesn’t want us looking down on others and Jesus doesn’t want us looking up in shame as if we aren’t worthy.[[4]](#footnote-4) Jesus wants us on the level plain so that we can call out the haughty and lift up the lowly. Jesus wants us to have a less than clear view. That is the Kingdom of God.

I think that is why I like the Affirmation of Faith that we shared together today so much. The Maasai creed was written in 1960 by the Maasai people of East Africa and it expresses the essentials of the Christian faith within the experience of the Maasai people. Jesus was born poor in a little village, left his home, and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and humanity, showing that the meaning of religion is love. I have much to learn from the Maasai people and their faith helps my faith grow.

In less than 10 days, 864 United Methodist delegates will gather from around the world in St. Louis, Missouri, for a special called General Conference. General Conference is the legislative body of the United Methodist Church, they are like our Congress. This special called General Conference is meeting to discern a “way forward” beyond our division about human sexuality, interpretation of scripture, and the unity of the church. I have been praying a lot about this meeting. One of my prayers is that I will love the people who have a different position than me. I have been praying that people that I disagree with will flourish in the power of the Holy Spirit and Christ’s goodness and the grace of God.

I want every single person, those I agree with and those I don’t, every single person to know that they matter and to know that they are loved by God and by me. A level plain where everyone is valued and loved. And when nighttime comes on February 26 and the General Conference is over, Greenland Hills will still be Greenland Hills. There will still be songs to be sung, prayers to be said, and scripture to be read. Our building will still be filled with Preschool kids, our Pray, Read, Grow book group, Chancel Choir, Singapore Slingers, and the Dallas Music Collective giving adults violin, viola, cello and bass lessons to support Ubuntu Music Project, an afterschool violin program for undeserved students at Zaragoza Elementary School here in East Dallas. 100% of the graduates of the Ubuntu Music Project have been admitted to magnet junior high schools in Dallas ISD. Our building is filled with neighborhood association meetings, Kindermusik classes, and eleven Narcotics Anonymous meetings a week. We partner with Emanuel Community Center food pantry serving the hungry and the homeless on Tuesday mornings. We baptize babies, celebrate Communion together, and have delicious potluck lunches.

The United Methodist Church may look differently after this General Conference, but our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world will be the same. Helping to bring about God’s kingdom here on earth. Now it is our job to pray for hearts to be opened and for God to use the United Methodist Church to love.

What is hard for me to hear today from our scripture is that God doesn’t bless us when we protect what we have, whether it is our money or our institutions like the United Methodist Church or even Greenland Hills. God doesn’t bless the well off, the full, the comfortable, the well spoken of. God is with those who have nothing but God. Jesus is speaking and creating a new, unsettling, upsetting order. We try to make Jesus’ words easier, and we humans have been trying since Jesus said them. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus blesses the poor in spirit and we like that much better. It sounds more appealing to our ears because we are all poor in spirit, right? We want to put ourselves on the side of the blessed. It is hard to put ourselves on the side of the woes.

In Greek there are two words for poor. One we could translate as the working poor and one is for the destitute, the beggar. Jesus is saying the destitute poor. Blessed are you indigent, you at the very bottom, you who are overlooked, you who don’t count because you never get counted. “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” This is what God is doing; this is where God stands in history. The poor enjoy God’s protection and special favor, and it matters how we care for the poor. As Christians we want everyone to live with dignity, independence, and self-respect.

Did you see the report from anti-poverty nonprofit Oxfam a few weeks ago? They reported 26 billionaires own the same wealth as the poorest 3.8 billion people. Last year it was 43 billionaires. From 43 to 26. The gap between rich and poor is fracturing our society, poisoning politics and fueling public anger. The wealth of billionaires has increased by $900 billion in the last year. That is $2.5 billion a day. While the poorest half of the world has seen their wealth decease by 11%. Since the 2008 financial crisis the number of billionaires has doubled. Men hold 50% more of the world’s wealth than women. In the United States the 400 richest Americans own more wealth than all black households and one quarter of Latino households. Inequality is not inevitable, it’s a political choice. We have to decide if we want public good or private wealth.

Jesus’ words are encouragement and vindication for those at the bottom of society, those who are overlooked, those who are told that they don’t count. Where will we place our trust? In God or in ourselves? In God or in an institution like the United Methodist Church? In God or in our money? In God or in our own resources? If we choose the way of God, we choose the way of the poor. How do we follow Jesus? Just like the disciples did. They left everything and walked the way of Jesus. Following Jesus is about sacrifice and that is nothing less than daunting. Jesus demands our all. Everything, even our money. God wants our entire lives.

Have you heard of the cow ant? In an ant hill there are chambers filled with cow ants clinging to the walls with their enormous bellies swollen with a form of nectar. These cow ants are living storehouses, they are filled with the ant hill’s surplus food. They are filled to overflowing, condemned to being endlessly stuffed, eternally immobilized by the very weight of their awesome fullness. I wonder if they are aware that for them this is all there is, has ever been, and ever will be. The cow ants never see daylight, they never know anything except getting full, the kind of fullness that is actually emptiness.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We are hard wired to look out for ourselves and Jesus wants us to be rewired. Jesus’ mission is to be a light to the whole world and that requires that we embrace his mission and prioritize those outside the circle of privilege. The things with which we fill up our lives leave us empty. God will fill us up with that which sustains. Are we going to hoard the world’s goods and then swell up like a cow ant. It will leave us empty. There is a better way. All we have to do is follow Jesus. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/three-month-dutch-church-vigil-to-protect-refugees-finally-ends-1.3777301 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5287 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5287 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5287 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dannals, Robert. A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. P. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)