



HAPPY?

Luke 6:20-31

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As the presidential election looms, I know many of you feel as if you are carrying a heavy burden. Somehow our vote feels weightier this election. But in Jesus' time, as in ours, there were tremendous amounts of political issues to navigate. He had the court in the Sanhedrin, the rebel factions in the Zealots, the sometimes traitorous local government in the house of Herod, and, of course, the Roman oppressors. And though he spoke about them, Jesus never invested that much time dealing with any of them. Apparently his heart and mind were in a different place. So this morning, to help our hearts focus on Jesus' heart, we turn ourselves away from the election to a place of deepest concern to him – the poor.

The beatitudes are a famous collection of "blessed" phrases that we find in both Matthew's and Luke's gospels. In Matthew, Jesus declares, "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*." We can make sense out of that. The poverty of our spirit turns our soul to God. But Luke's, "Blessed are the *poor*?" To compound matters, there is some debate as to whether the Greek word *makarios* should be translated more authentically as "happy" rather than the polished and refined "blessed".

It is hard to imagine a happy state being born from poverty. In fact, the greatest increased health risk for those in poverty is depression. (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/158417/poverty-comes-depression->) It is easy to understand the depression; there is also an increased risk for obesity, asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attacks, and a higher mortality rate. The maze many of the working poor have to navigate to obtain medicine and food is staggering. Compound that with a lack of transportation and a lack of flexibility at work, the mere thought of dealing with a crisis would be enough to drive me into immediate despair.

So, though we can say with confidence that poverty is not a state of happiness, I believe Jesus is trying to force us to look through different eyes. Jesus does not stop at saying "happy are the poor". It is not the state of poverty that brings joy but how God deals with the poor – he gives them the kingdom. Jesus says the poor are blessed, for the kingdom of God belongs to them. Not "will be," but "is". These are Jesus' words, not mine.

To understand this kingdom, we have to explore more of Luke's gospel. First, recall a phrase from Mary's words at the birth of Jesus, "He has filled the hungry with good things." Jesus' own words were "I have been anointed to bring good news to the poor." Jesus believes his calling was to reach out to them with the love and power of God. And, finally, Jesus ties it all together in the eleventh chapter when he declares, "The kingdom of God has arrived among you." Therefore, the kingdom is Jesus and he belongs to them.

When Jesus declares the poor are happy, it is because as the manifestation of God's power, presence, and love, he has committed to being good news to them. They are blessed because they have a special place in the heart of God which is so very easy to see in how he lived his life. Think about where he spent his time and to whom he ministered. According to evangelical hunger activist Ron Sider, the second most predominant theme in the whole of the Bible is food and feeding the hungry.

Jesus did so because he knew the depth of desperation which sprang from the degrading life which tore their souls to pieces, bit by bit, over the years. Jesus lived this ethic and calls us to the same ministry today.

Happiness for the poor means at least three things: bread on the table, the promise of it for

tomorrow, and the love and respect of your neighbors.

Bread on the table is a metaphor for the basic daily necessities of life: health, food, water, and shelter. When Jesus encountered the hungry, he fed them. When storms threatened his disciples, he calmed them.

Jesus calls us to the same loving acts. St. Augustine said, "What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like."

Today, we will show this love through collecting canned goods for hungry stomachs and blood for those in need. Just this past week we met with area churches, through the Interfaith Ministry Alliance, to plan to build homes on the Northside of Spartanburg. You do a tremendous amount to "put food on the table."

The promise of "bread" for tomorrow is more challenging. The oft quoted and sometimes overused phrase, "Give a person a fish and he eats for today, teach them how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" often eludes us.

Chiapas, Mexico is typical of poverty stricken regions around the world. Many farmers had to abandon their land because, due to market fluctuations, they could not earn enough money. It drove some north to the border to make \$1 an hour. But, of course, it was not enough to feed their family, move back home, and restart their land. It was a great wrenching of the soul to leave the land, land that some families had worked for generations.

Now, being so close to Arizona, they were tempted to go even further, to make a dangerous and illegal crossing, to work on a golf course where they could make \$10 an hour, ten times as much! What would you do if it were the only way to feed your family? One man made that crossing. He was cut by the mesquite trees, fell into a ditch, and, in the process, was caught, shamed, and deported. He

said to the border guard, "I am just trying to feed my family. What would you do? You and I have the same blood running through us. We are the same." The patrolmen put his boot on the man's neck and said, "You are nothing like me."

He returned to Mexico and the Lilly of the Valley Presbyterian Church that he was a part of. It is a joint US-Mexico congregation. As he shared his story, he said if they could just get a better price for their coffee, they would not need to leave their country, their homes, and their families.

Do you like coffee? The rich aroma sends a feeling of warmth from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Sometimes, as I prepare to take a sip, I let the warm mist from the cup bathe my forehead. It is a daily friend that gives me a little blessing. For all coffee has done for me, perhaps I can give something back and so can you.

On Tuesday, at our Presbytery meeting, I learned about Café Justo, a coffee co-op in Chiapas, Mexico. It began with that man's story. Presbyterians all around the country have put Café Justo in their morning cups. They get a delicious, organic coffee and the coffee growers get a better price and can stay in their homes with their families on their land. Thus Café Justo gives not only "bread for the day" for these families, but the promise of it for tomorrow, as well.

But there is one more thing Café Justo does and it is the most important of all. All week, God has been sending me a verse – John 13:34. I heard it twice at Presbytery on Tuesday, from two different pastors. Then I heard it from Pastor Pierre Salmon at St. John's Missionary Baptist Church at the Interfaith Alliance gathering. He told me how Jesus' words, "Love one another as I have loved you" gave him the courage and the strength to forgive his father. That led to reconciliation and, finally, his father came to hear him preach for the first time in over 15 years of ministry.

When Jesus encountered the poor and the oppressed, he not only gave them food and healing, he gave them love and respect. He treated them as

beloved children of God, worthy not only of his power but his time and attention as well.

Mother Theresa once said, "The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread." Every cup of Café Justo forms a bond – a bond of friendship and fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Mexico. It is a cup of love, respect, and of hope. Amen.