

“THE GREAT REVERSAL”**Pastor Becky Stephens****Text: Luke 6:17-26**

This past Monday, my Granny turned 94. My sister, Rennay, wrote a tribute to her on her birthday that is absolutely beautiful. I want to share it with you.

Our Granny turned 94 today! Some say she's the matriarch of our family. Others say she's the backbone. You could also say she's the thread that holds us all together. She is definitely all of those things and more! In the 42 short years that I've known her, she has taught me some of the greatest lessons just by being the woman that she is. If you know my Granny any at all, you know there are certain things you can expect from her. She can be feisty, a bit spunky, a little ornery, and a whole lot stubborn!! However, there are other and more important things that you can expect from her. You can always expect her to be honest no matter what. She is loyal and supports her entire family with all that she has. She still worries about her children (in their 60s and 70s) and doesn't like it if they are out past dark. Her grandchildren and great grandchildren put a sparkle in her eye and are her pride and joy. If you visit when it's warm outside, you can expect her out on the porch swing. If you drive by without stopping, you can expect a lecture. But I would encourage you to stop. Not to avoid the lecture, but to take a little time to talk, to hear a story about her childhood and the trouble she'd get into. Or to hear what the Farmers' Almanac suggests about planting crops, weaning your baby from a bottle, or when to plant flowers. You can expect when you sit down beside her, she's gonna pat your leg with her aged and wrinkly hands that hold so many stories in every crevasse, and she will ask you about your day. She celebrates in all of our joys and she cries with us in our sadness. She loves us with her own special "Granny" kind of love. Only the good Lord knows how many more mornings I'll be blessed with to sit and drink coffee with her or how many more porch swing conversations we will get to have. However, one thing that I know for sure is that I have been blessed because this amazing woman is my Granny and I'm loved by her.

I think we all think we are Granny's favorite, but truthfully, individually and collectively, we all feel her personal blessing. Having grown up with this sense of being blessed, I am particularly sensitive to the many who have never received a vote of confidence or heard an encouraging word or have ever experienced an overriding sense of well-being from their families. I leave conversations heart broken when I'm told that parents declared their own children to be "abominations to the Lord," or where neglect or physical abuse occurred.

This is one of the reasons why I have loved the church these many years, for the church, at least to me, was the one place that was set apart to be redemptive, especially to those of us who were wounded in some way. Admittedly, some congregations do better with this than others, but the church's original challenge was to be the place where we would not just acknowledge God's imprints on our souls but where we could also celebrate the divine image within us. It's the place where spiritual parents could step in where earthly parents failed and bridge the gap for healing and restoration.

The Old Testament is full of stories where the search for blessing is the focus. There is the story of Jacob stealing his birthright blessing from his brother Esau. There is the story where Jacob refused to stop wrestling

with an angel until he could receive a blessing. There is the story of Joseph and his brothers' jealousy that Joseph was given their father's blessing. These stories, and others like them, continue on until we reach the pages of the New Testament where we meet Jesus who gives blessing to all.

In our text today, we find that Jesus has been up on the mountain to pray. He selects his disciples and then comes down to be with the multitudes that have gathered. The writer clearly states specific geographic regions that are represented there: Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon. It is a clear message to us that whatever Jesus is prepared to teach is for all the people, the Jews and the Gentiles.

The audience includes the sick, the troubled and other folks who have special concerns. In typical Luke fashion, Jesus' healing actions and his words are closely interrelated. It is our reminder that the good news that Jesus brings wraps words and actions all up together. Jesus may not know these people intimately, but he does recognize their personal condition in life and the deep expectations that they bring with them. The writer tells us that they come hoping to be touched by Jesus—to receive just a little bit of his power so that they might be healed. They come looking for a blessing. The crowd waits for Jesus to speak. They wait in anticipation of what divine words Jesus might say.

Here these words from Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ Jesus came down from the mountain with them and stood on a large area of level ground. A great company of his disciples and a huge crowd of people from all around Judea and Jerusalem and the area around Tyre and Sidon joined him there. ¹⁸ They came to hear him and to be healed from their diseases, and those bothered by unclean spirits were healed. ¹⁹ The whole crowd wanted to touch him, because power was going out from him and he was healing everyone.

²⁰ Jesus raised his eyes to his disciples and said:

*"Happy are you who are poor,
because God's kingdom is yours.*

*²¹ Happy are you who hunger now,
because you will be satisfied.*

*Happy are you who weep now,
because you will laugh.*

²² Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you, and condemn your name as evil because of the Human One. ²³ Rejoice when that happens! Leap for joy because you have a great reward in heaven. Their ancestors did the same things to the prophets.

*²⁴ But how terrible for you who are rich,
because you have already received your comfort.*

*²⁵ How terrible for you who have plenty now,
because you will be hungry.*

*How terrible for you who laugh now,
because you will mourn and weep.*

*²⁶ How terrible for you when all speak well of you.
Their ancestors did the same things to the false prophets.*

So...we see that Jesus begins with a short list of ways we can be blessed. This state of blessedness is characterized by abounding joy. It is happiness that is so complete that it cannot be contained. It is an awareness that bubbles up inside of us and overflows so that everyone notices our sense of elation. It is an extension of the happiness that we receive from our salvation. Jesus, however, does not include anything within his list that we would normally think of that would bring us such extreme joy. In fact, he completely contradicts the ideas and values of a materialistic society which equates happiness with house, car, and bank account. It's our introduction to the topsy-turvy world Christ presents as an alternative to the status quo.

Jesus has 4 carefully constructed comparisons of blessings and woes, and they are the opposite of what we would anticipate. He says:

Blessed are the poor...but woe to the rich.
Blessed are the hungry...but woe to those who are full.
Blessed are the weeping...but woe to those that are laughing.
Blessed are the rejected...but woe to those who are accepted.

As Jesus is speaking to those gathered around, it becomes obvious that he is not interested in keeping things the same. Rather, his purpose was to usher in a world that would literally be reversed. In other words, these blessings and woes announce that God, in Jesus Christ, already sees the world in a strikingly different way than we do. The “real world,” for all those who are in Christ, is one in which most of the major status roles in life are reversed.

There is no contingency plan. There are no urgings or exhortations to behave in certain ways to be able to earn these blessings and avoid the curses. In fact, there is no call to action at all. Jesus is just spelling out the facts. He is painting a picture for us of what the Kingdom of God is. He’s not making suggestions about how to be happy or giving warnings on how to keep from being miserable. Jesus is making defining statements of the way life is inside and outside the reign of God. It’s a reversal of fortunes for the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the full and the empty.

Interesting fact: these curses and blessings are anchored in the present as well as the future. “Blessed are you poor, for yours is already the Kingdom of God” and “Woe to you that are rich, for you have already received your consolation”. Both of these are already here. They are firmly cemented in the present and are not promises for the future. However, in the other blessings and woes, “now” is contrasted with “you shall,” meaning in the future. Combining the present and the future reminds us that with Jesus, we are already beginning to experience the Kingdom of God here in our everyday lives and will ultimately have it fulfilled in the future. We are to be people who out of recognition of our own blessedness, share blessings with others, creating the Kingdom of God here on earth. Let me give you some examples of what I mean.

A few years ago on a Communion Sunday, I charged the congregation with something to think about as they came forward to receive Holy Communion. I’m never quite sure what you do with your thoughts when we have Communion. It is one of those times I have to trust you to have holy and sacred moments within your own spirits. But after the service, I received confirmation that this was the case. A guest approached me and said that the service had been powerfully meaningful. Always curious as to what this means, I decided to ask for an explanation. The guest told me about a devastating divorce that had been followed with a desire to be more authentic in his personal life. The guest was now attending our church with his love interest and his 10-year-old daughter. While he had reclaimed most of his life, the one thing that had been consistently denied was communion because no one had ever given this person an invitation, a blessing, permission to return to the table.

On that Communion Sunday, however, our guest heard an invitation, a calling to come, taste and see how good the Lord is. And he took the elements gratefully for the first time in years. This is the blessing that comes from the Kingdom of God at work.

The Russian Rabbis tell a story that goes like this:

In Krakov, there lived a man named Isaac, son of Yekel, a very poor man whose family was often hungry. One night in a dream, he saw the distant city of Prague, noticing there a certain bridge with a treasure buried

beneath it. The dream was so vivid that he could not forget it, especially when it kept recurring every night for two weeks. Finally, in order to get rid of the dream, he decided to walk from Krakov to Prague to see for himself.

After several days, he arrived in Prague, found the bridge and went underneath to locate the treasure. Suddenly, a soldier grabbed him and started questioning him. What was he doing prowling under the bridge? Being an innocent man, he told the truth. He was looking for a treasure he had dreamed was underneath the bridge.

The soldier roared with laughter. "You stupid Jew! Don't you know that you cannot trust what you see in dreams? Why, for the last two weeks, I myself dreamed that far away in Krakov in the house of a Jew named Isaac, son of Yekel, there is a treasure buried underneath the stove in his kitchen. But wouldn't it be the most idiotic thing in the world if I were to go all the way there to look for it? One could waste a lifetime looking for treasure that does not exist." Still laughing, the soldier gave Isaac a kick and let him go.

So Isaac, son of Yekel, walked back to Krakov, to his own home, where he moved the stove in his kitchen, found the treasure buried there and lived to a ripe old age as a rich man.

My friends, the Kingdom of God is as close as the treasure under your stove. It is a blessing that is not dependent upon anyone else's judgment. It is a blessing that God willingly offers to every one of us; and as the body of Christ, we are to share with everyone around us. All we have to do is receive it.

So I wonder, are you ready to receive this blessing? Are you ready to begin to experience the treasures of the Kingdom of God?

Our desire, O God, is to receive and give the blessing of your Kingdom. Give us the courage to accept your blessing and the wisdom to bless others. Amen.

1 Corinthians 15:12-20 (CEB)

¹² So if the message that is preached says that Christ has been raised from the dead, then how can some of you say, "There's no resurrection of the dead"? ¹³ If there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ hasn't been raised either. ¹⁴ If Christ hasn't been raised, then our preaching is useless and your faith is useless. ¹⁵ We are found to be false witnesses about God, because we testified against God that he raised Christ, when he didn't raise him if it's the case that the dead aren't raised. ¹⁶ If the dead aren't raised, then Christ hasn't been raised either. ¹⁷ If Christ hasn't been raised, then your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins, ¹⁸ and what's more, those who have died in Christ are gone forever. ¹⁹ If we have a hope in Christ only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. He's the first crop of the harvest^[a] of those who have died.

L: The Word of God, for the People of God.

P: Thanks be to God. Amen.