

“Woe to you ...!”
What the “woes” teach us

January 20, 2008

Text: Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26

I.

The gospel of **Luke** has always been my favorite gospel. From my days in the Peace Corps in Panama ... and then, before going to Seminary, my two years with OEO, the Office of Economic Opportunity, as a *Youth Development Director*, along with many of you, I have had a very basic compassion and concern for the poor ... for the downtrodden ... the dispossessed ... the oppressed ... the marginalized ... i.e., the victims of injustice and the lingering inequities of life.

Whenever we come in contact with a homeless person or someone mired in the culture of poverty ... whenever we venture into the ghettos of our American cities, even some of the deprived and run-down areas here in Miami-Dade County, these inequities jump out at us.

Or whenever we travel in the *third world* ... for example, in Tijuana, Mexico, across the border from sunny San Diego (where we lived for fifteen years), there is awful poverty and human deprivation.

In Haiti, where I participated in a mission-outreach project back in 1981, there is some of the worst poverty in the Western hemisphere. A couple of years ago, in their travels, my daughters spent a few days in India. While they enjoyed the Indian cuisine and much of the culture, they found the poverty and human suffering overwhelming.

In all of this, again, we're reminded of the inequities that continue to plague our planet.

II.

When asked what led me to enroll in seminary, I always respond that my calling was in the context of the *prophetic tradition*, the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, like an Amos, or a Jeremiah (this morning's text), or a Second Isaiah.

I wanted to make some contribution in making the world a better, more just and equitable place to live. I have deep passions about ways to do this ... from ...

- ... raising the consciousness of each individual, through education, articles, sermons, travel, personal experience and endless conversation ...

- ... to grandiose schemes for transforming the *always mal-aligned* **United Nations**, to where we would have regional solutions to global problems and on and on.

These passions and value-commitments are all well and good, of course. And it's nice that they led me to Seminary and to the Christian ministry, where I continue to feel a strong sense of *calling* and commitment. But no matter how much I do, I never feel like it is enough. No doubt, many of you feel the same.

While I try not to beat myself up too much with guilt, still, the *guilt* cloud always seems to hover not too far away. That's not necessarily a bad thing ... because there is such a thing as *healthy guilt*—guilt that motivates us to do good things.

III.

And so this morning we read portions of Luke's *Sermon on the Plain*, his version of what is for Matthew the *Sermon on the MOUNT*.

And while **Matthew's** rendering of Jesus' sermon is more unified and, therefore, more well known, there are some distinctions in **Luke** that are important.

Digressing for a moment, now, this is CROP Walk recruitment Sunday in our church. This is an annual event, hosted by our church for the Miami Lakes area. And of course, the funds we raise from our *WALK* go to hunger relief around the world and in our own community.

And so, understandably, we're highlighting our concern this morning for world poverty and the ensuing problems of the *poor*: hunger, health care, education, economic opportunity and the list goes on.

And now, back to Luke. Luke's sermon is pointed more towards the plight of the poor.

1. While Matthew talks about **being poor in spirit** (*blessed are the poor in spirit*), Luke talks about actually **being poor** (*blessed are you who are poor*, says Luke).
2. In Matthew, it's *blessed are those who hunger for righteousness*, always a good thing; in Luke, it's *blessed are you who are hungry now ...*
3. In the Matthew, there's a *mourning* about the end of things (an eschatological mourning), whereas in Luke, it's actual *mourning* and *grief* caused by lingering injustices and inequities.

Clearly, for Luke, there's an overriding empathy and compassion—an active advocacy; Luke's gospel is, indeed, *Good News for the poor*.

Too often, in our reading and reflections on Luke's *Sermon on the Plain*, we stop right there, with the *blesseds*. But there's more. It may not be pleasant, but it's there—the last part of our reading this morning: *the woes*.

IV.

Woe, it turns out, is a serious word in the Bible. Years ago, Old Testament scholar, **Walter Brueggemann** made the comment—about the word, *woe*, in the Bible: *woe means you're going to die*.

With regard to Israel's sins of excess and idolatry, when an Old Testament prophet used the word, *woe*—such as an Amos, for example it was a heavy matter. Amos' prophetic activity was during the period known as *the Silver Age*, distinct from the *Golden Age* of King David, but a period marked by bursting abundance and opulence. However, it was a period, too, when the poor were taken advantage of, becoming victims of the profligate affluence.

Check out some of Amos' *woes*:

*Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and who feel secure in the mountain of Samaria ...
Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory ... and stretch themselves out on the finest
couches ...but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.*

In other words, *woe* means ***take notice ... wake up ... be aware of the BIG PICTURE situation in your community and in the wider world because the GOD of Israel, unmistakably, has a preferential option for the poor.***

Here are Luke's *woes*:

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.

The *woes* of Luke's gospel, simply put, are an *in our face* reminder that we have to pay attention to the little guy ... to the ones that, so often, are left out ... rejected ... turned away ... scorned ... ignored ... oppressed ... marginalized, whatever it is.

What the *woes* of Luke remind us is that one of our primary functions as Christians—as followers of Jesus Christ—is to do what we can—something, to be sure—to reduce the glaring *inequities* in the world ...

... what **Bill Gates** called, in his Commencement Address to the graduates of Harvard University, class of 2007 ... ***the appalling disparities of health, and wealth, and opportunity that condemn millions of people to lives of despair.***

In that Commencement speech, Gates called *reducing these inequities* the highest human achievement.

V.

CROP WALK 2008 gives us an opportunity to actually DO something. It's a three mile walk, for those who are able. We also have a one mile walk ... as well as a walk around our church ground or buildings. In other words, if there's even a spark of *will* in you to walk, we've got a *walk* for you.

Part of the problem of poverty, in general, and world hunger, in particular, is that we feel so powerless to make a difference. It's all so complex and, therein, overwhelming.

And it's true. So what are we to do?

We can't just cop out and do nothing. At the same time, we get worn down by the constant drum beat ... the endless news stories and photographs ... of victims of natural disasters ... casualties of war, ethnic cleansing and tribal conflict ... with heart-breaking stories of refugees and gruesome death and suffering.

It's too much. How much guilt are we supposed to endure? We're good people. We want to do the right thing. So again, what to do? Always the human question.

VI.

There's a poignant conversation in **Arthur Miller's** play, *Incident at Vichy*, that can be useful to us at this point.

In a dialogue between a French officer who had collaborated with the Nazis and a friend who had been part of the resistance. The collaborator was going on and on with his own version of the *woes*.

Woe is me for this and shame on me for that, obviously trying to somehow feel better about himself. Finally, the resister had had enough: ***I don't want your guilt, he related. I want your responsibility.***

That's the good word, friends. Our guilt, in and of itself, doesn't make things better. What makes things better ... what addresses the matter of the ongoing inequities of the planet, is us taking some level of responsibility.

And the point is, we can.

Never think that we can't do anything. Always, there are things we can do. This is what the *woes* teach us. The *woes* are a wake-up call ... a reminder. There are things we can do. And if these *woes* serve to make us—each of us in our own way—more responsible, then that is GOOD NEWS indeed.

And so, at the conclusion of the service, we hope you'll chose to sign up, over in Fellowship Hall, for CROP Walk 2008. You can sign up as a family. What a great lesson to teach your children ...

1. about the need to be aware of those in the wider world who have less than we ...
2. and about how, as Christians, part of the living out of our faith is to actually DO something about it.
3. Our children can walk, if not the three mile track, then the one mile. They can even recruit sponsors themselves for their walk and, in that way, help raise money just as we adults do.

Our goal this year is SIXTY walkers.

May God's blessings be upon us as we seek to do what we can, in CROP Walk 2008, to alleviate world hunger and to make a difference.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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