

Sermon – Luke 6:17-26
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Grace Lutheran Church
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“A Plainspoken Savior”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I don't know about you, but we have it. Bad. Olympic fever, that is. It doesn't much matter which sport is on, we'll be watching it. Yesterday morning I went down to the basement at 5:30 and found that our boys were already awake, taking in the ice dancing competition. It's true that in non-Olympic year I don't spend much time following bobsledding or biathlon. I don't know why curlers encourage their teammates by yelling, “curl.” I mean, I don't tell my kids to “hockey” or “baseball.” No matter. Every four years, it's a joy to watch these remarkable people pursue their dreams. Who will make the podium? Who will take home the gold? Viewed in the way we look at too many things, we can reduce the whole experience to wining and losing. Sometimes, though, it's these Olympians – so dedicated to their craft, so intent on doing their best – who remind us that winning just might not be the most important thing. I'll come back to that in a moment.
2. Jesus' words today, from this sermon preached not high on a mount but low on a level plain, should have us squirming in our pews. In this central teaching, Jesus speaks of what it means to live a blessed life. Making the podium, winning the gold, being on top; these aren't at the top of Jesus' list. Blessed are you when you are poor, Jesus says. Blessed are you who are hungry. Who weep. Who are hated. To you belongs the Kingdom of God. To you who have nothing now will good things come. Unlike in the Sermon on

the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is not speaking of spiritual or ethical categories, but of physical conditions. Actual poverty. Consuming hunger. Blessed are you when you are in these circumstances? Jesus speaks here not only of blessings; he pronounces woes, making explicit the corollaries of the blessings. Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who are laughing, who are respected. You, Jesus says, have received your reward. But don't count on it lasting. And that just might be the point Jesus is trying to make. Nothing, neither the good nor the bad of the now, is the going to get the last word. There is a great reversal coming.

3. One of the stories that has grabbed my attention during these Olympics is that of American freestyle skier Colby Stevenson. While always an incredible talent, Colby's life was turned upside-down six years ago. Literally. Driving home from a competition late at night, Colby fell asleep behind the wheel and flipped his car several times. The roof of the car collapsed, and his skull fractured into more than thirty places, leaving what he described as a jigsaw puzzle for doctors to put back together. Left fighting for his life, getting back on skis was hardly the primary goal. And yet, just a few days ago, Colby brought home the silver medal in the big air competition. Reflecting on his journey, Colby said that he hadn't learned to win earlier in life, because earlier in life he was always trying to win. It was only after losing almost everything that everything fell into place. He stopped trying to win, saying that he's simply grateful to be alive. Being able to ski is just a bonus. And with gratitude as his new foundation, the rest came into focus. His car accident was definitely a woe, but it wasn't the last word.
4. Jesus, like Jeremiah before him, pulls no punches. This life, he knows, is filled with blessings and woes. Neither blessings nor woes always come to those who deserve them. Many who are unrighteous, unethical, accumulate earthly joys for themselves. Many who have done nothing to deserve it nonetheless end up suffering. This is how it is in our broken world. But it is not how

things will always be. Look at the tenses in which Jesus speaks. Yes, now you may be hungry, weeping, hated, but you will be filled; you will laugh. Your reward will be great in heaven. Interestingly, in the first beatitude, Jesus speaks in the present tense. Blessed are you who are poor, for your *is* the kingdom of God. *Is*. Right now, today. In the midst of suffering and need, there is something present that cannot be taken away from you. God's kingdom is yours, and will be forever. Everything else, however, will not last. Your riches, your fullness, your joy while others suffer? These will not last. You can't take it with you, as they say. Woe to you if you make the mistake of thinking these are the most important things.

5. We simply cannot assume that our current condition defines us. For those of us who prosper by the standards of this world, that might be challenging news at first. Your standing in the kingdom is not established by how much you have today. And for those who live in want – of wealth or health or joy – this is cause for hope. God, come down in Christ to meet you in the low places of this world, sees you. Jesus sees you in your suffering and joins you there. But for all of us, *all of us*, this is good news. The status quo is not the last word. For those without, God promises that fullness is coming. For those who have, God promises release from the bondage of having. For all of us, a great reversal is coming. Whatever we have in this world, whatever this world has done to us, whatever we have done to one another, will be upended in the new world Christ is creating. We can never get it right or create security through power or status. The preacher Linda Lee Clader writes: “No matter who we are – how rich or poor or successful or oppressed – we cannot be confident that our worth or the meaning of our lives depends on our position in society. We cannot claim that either our prosperity or our poverty is a reward of a curse from God.” Rather, she continues, “we can be secure in our faith in God's justice, a justice rooted in God's delight in us, and in all of creation.”

6. The plain truth of it all is that while we may create for ourselves fleeting moments of happiness, true joy can only be received as a gift from God. We, the psalmist sings, are blessed when we delight in God's Word. We are like trees, and trees can't water themselves. Left to ourselves, we would dry up and wither. But God in God's grace has planted us near streams of living water, nourishing us through the Word of God who is Jesus Christ. This Jesus was willing to lose everything in the eyes of this world, fractured and shattered upon the cross of Calvary. But the status quo of death would not last long; God refused to let the woes have the last word. In his resurrection, everything else falls into place for us. Put back together, the divisions of this world will be erased in the future God is unfolding. Rich and poor, have and have-not, will no longer be defining categories. With a gratitude that changes everything, we are invited to live in God's future today, giving thanks for the blessings of this world and remembering that these blessings are not meant for us alone, but are meant to be shared, just as God shares the abundant life of the Kingdom with us. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.