

Sermon for Zion, October 27, 2019

Hymns: 39 – God of mercy, God of grace; 625 – Seek Ye First; 501 – Live in charity;
692 – Where charity and love prevail

Scripture: Luke 6:27-36

Sermon Title: On earth as it is in heaven

Luke 6:27-36

To you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

I love visiting churches all around the world. The way people build and decorate their church tells you a lot about them, and a lot about how they practice their faith. Zion, for instance, was built so that no matter where you sit, you aren't too far away from the pulpit, which is placed front and centre. There is a big organ for congregational singing, and lofts for the choir to gather. There's a Sunday school wing. There were no great big stained glass windows to distract your attention away from what the minister was preaching – those were added later. In our Presbyterian tradition, as our building reveals, church is the place to go to sing, learn, enjoy the choir, and hear a sermon. Sunday by Sunday, the Scriptures are proclaimed and explained, and our faith is renewed, strengthened, and prepared for service.

A very different experience is to be had visiting Orthodox churches. Whether in Greece, Russia, Israel, or even here in Canada, Orthodox churches are extensively and often richly decorated, and in a very specific and intentional way. There are many icons of various holy folk from the past centuries of the faith. There are paintings or mosaics of Biblical scenes and personages. Above that, often images of angels and other such beings, and above that, perhaps even in the interior of the dome, a painting, mosaic and fresco of Jesus himself. In the Orthodox tradition, church is the place to go to get a glimpse of heaven – the church itself is, as it were, a piece, a fragment, a shard of heaven fallen to earth. Imagine a chandelier. One of the beautiful crystal teardrops falls to the ground. We pick it up; hold it in our hands; it is still reflecting the light. Our eyes are drawn upwards to the heavens. That's what an Orthodox church, with its candles and frescoes and icons and gold is trying to replicate. Sunday by Sunday, participating in the liturgy and sacraments, gaining a glimpse of heaven, faith is renewed, strengthened, and for a moment, heaven is brought into our world.

Luke, in Chapter 6 of his Gospel, is giving us a glimpse of heaven too. As in the Presbyterian tradition, Jesus is preaching. People are learning. For all we know, there was some singing too. But as in the Orthodox tradition, in this passage from Luke, it is as though a teardrop of crystal, a shard of heaven, has fallen to earth. For Luke, that piece of heavenly light is Jesus himself. He is preaching about what we call Heaven, and which Luke calls the Kingdom of God. In fact, for Luke, Jesus is nothing less than the Kingdom of God itself; nothing less than Heaven come to earth.

The passage actually begins a few verses prior to those we read. Listen (Luke 6:17-19):

Jesus went down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

The Twelve Apostles. A vast crowd from near and far. Diseases healed. Infirmities cured. The tormented delivered. And in the centre of it all, Jesus, towards whom all are reaching, and from whom power, healing, restoration, life itself is flowing like a mighty river. What is this, other than a glimpse of heaven itself, a foretaste of the Kingdom in its fullness?

And to those who are gathered around, to those hungry for his teaching, Jesus says:

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.*

It is the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the persecuted, who have come to Jesus, who have, in their need, sought him out, who have gathered to hear him, to touch him, to be healed in body, mind and spirit. The Kingdom is theirs, for in their need they have realised, it is from Jesus, it is from the Kingdom come to Earth, that the power of life is flowing.

And to those who stand at a distance, to those who have chosen not to come, those who feel they need nothing more than they already have, those who hoard their resources and mock those in need, who care only of their own reputation and societal cachet – to them, there is a different message:

*But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.
Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.*

Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

There is within many people, the idea that God turns some people away from the Kingdom of Heaven. However, in this sermon Jesus points out that it is people themselves who have turned away from God, from God who invites all. “Jesus? Don’t need him. Heaven? Don’t need that either. I’ve got everything I need, and ever will.” God calls their name; they plug their ears; they turn away. It is to them, that Jesus says, “*Woe. Woe to you.*”

“*But to you who are **listening** I say:*” And now, to those who have come to Jesus, to those who are listening – to me, I hope, and to you – to us comes a further glimpse of the Kingdom, and foretaste of Heaven itself:

To you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

What is heaven like? I am asked this surprisingly often, as though I myself have already been there, have spent time there, have had a look around. I haven’t. But Jesus has. Heaven is, after all, his home town. And if you ask Jesus, he’ll tell you, “In heaven, in the Kingdom of God, love reigns supreme. There are no enemies. There is no hatred. No one is wishing ill to another, or mistreating another. There is no violence, no intimidation, no bullying. Generosity is everywhere; there are none in need. All people live in love and consideration of the other. That’s what heaven is like,” says Jesus. “That is the Kingdom of God.”

And that is what we glimpsed in Jesus, who brought the Kingdom to life; it was, in Luke chapter 6, on earth as it is in heaven. And our job, our task, says Jesus, is to live as citizens of that kingdom; we are to be the shards of heaven in our world, the teardrops of crystal reflecting the heavenly light. And so Jesus says, “*Love your enemies,*” for then there are no enemies. “*Do good to those who hate you,*” for only then will hatred cease. “*Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you,*” for only then will the cycles of resentment and recrimination end. In short – but so much is said in so few words – “*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*” For when we do, as we do, the Kingdom of God is among us.

It is all a matter of living as the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, living as we daily pray, “*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” That’s what those words, that’s what that prayer, means. It isn’t wishful thinking; it is a statement of intent! “We will live by heaven’s rules,” we are saying when we pray it. “We will live according to the Kingdom to which we belong.” Jesus explains:

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you?”

Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.”

That’s how the world already works, says Jesus. Quid pro quo. Act only according to advantage. And where has that gotten us? Instead, here’s what heaven looks like; here’s how life is lived in the Kingdom of God:

“Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

We are the shards of heaven. We are the teardrops of crystal. As we reflect the love of God in our world, we are not only preparing for life in heaven, we are already living the heavenly life. Here. Now. Our reward is already great, for as we live in love, as we follow Jesus, we are already filled with the power of new life, and the promise of life eternal, for the Holy Spirit is alive within us, giving us the strength, the courage, the inspiration, to be the people of God.

I love our church. I love the vision its builders had, to create a space where we might gather in worship to sing, to learn, to listen. And I love the glimpse of heavenly light we get when the sun hits these windows. Even here, when the singing is strong and the word is proclaimed and the colours shine like the rainbow, it is like a shard of heaven, like a teardrop of crystal, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

But the Kingdom really takes form outside these doors, as - strengthened, inspired, renewed – we carry that light into our world, we live that light as Children of the Most High, as the brothers and sisters of Jesus, on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom where love reigns supreme. Where there are no enemies, no hatred. Where no one is wishing ill to another, or mistreating another. Where there is no violence, no intimidation, no bullying. Where generosity is everywhere; and so there are none in need. Where all people live in love and consideration of the other. That’s what heaven is like. That’s the Kingdom of God. And through our lives, as we reflect the light of Jesus, others will catch a glimpse of that Kingdom too. And will look up. And seek the light of God’s love. And join us, as together we live for Him.

Jesus went down... and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over who had come to hear him and to be healed. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.