

“Reversal of Fortune”  
February 23, 2025

Luke 6:17-26

We’ve been following the stories of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry this month. In these stories—and in some that we didn’t hear—circumstances change for people: the sick are healed, the blind receive sight, the lame walk—and even the dead are given new life.

As you listened, you might have remembered those disturbing December words that Luke gives to the pregnant Mary: “God has brought down the powerful and lifted the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

The coming of Christ brings a reversal of fortune: those who seem to be left out gain the abundance of life that God desires for all people.

So, when Jesus begins to teach those who would follow him, we are shocked, but not necessarily surprised, to hear:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

In Luke’s gospel, these words of Jesus are concrete and physical. These words are so shocking that others in the early church began to revise them, spiritualizing them, seeking to tame the disturbing good news of Jesus.

We spent a lot of time with the Sermon on the Mount during Lent last year. Those words begin with the Beatitudes—declarations of blessing that on first hearing, sound much like the words of blessing that we heard this morning. But in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus addresses those who are poor *in spirit* and those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*. And Matthew’s Gospel speaks of *those* who mourn, or hunger and thirst, keeping them at an arm’s length.

On the other hand, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus addresses his disciples as *you*: *you* who are poor, *you* who are hungry, and *you* who weep. Jesus draws near to you who have little or nothing at all. He speaks to you who don’t have enough money in your pockets, you who know the pain of an empty stomach.

Gathered here in the Congregational Church in the heart of Iowa City, most of us might wonder, then, if Jesus has anything to say to us—disciples who are for the most part prosperous and well fed. We face the frightening prospect that Jesus speaks to *us* when he says: “Woe to *you who are rich*, for you have received your consolation. Woe to *you who are full now*, for you will be hungry.”

As troubling as it might be, if we are going to listen to Jesus, we must begin to listen from where we are—and, again, for most of us that is with a sense of wealth and satiation, even if the economy

is a little unsteady right now. This is not a call to poverty, but it is a warning.

At the same time, as we listen, we can recognize our emptiness and sadness, our longing for something *other* than life as we find it much of the time.

So, a story, but first an apology: When Robin studied preaching at the Divinity School with Krister Stendahl, he admonished the class: “None of your little stories.” Get to the heart of the matter and don’t talk about yourself. I had a different professor for preaching, but my guess is he would have agreed. And generally, I follow that rule, because it is a good one. But perhaps you will forgive me if I tell you about something that happened years ago.

One summer—*decades* ago, I was at home in Wisconsin on a Sunday evening, channel surfing through the early evening T.V. shows. Stumbling upon *Sixty Minutes*, I paused. There on the screen was someone I knew when I was in high school. He was from Missouri and I was from Illinois, but we had attended the same debate workshop one summer at Southern Illinois University in the early 70's.

As I watched I discovered that he had become the Attorney General of Missouri and was prosecuting some case that *60 Minutes* was profiling. As the story continued, I began to get depressed over the differences between the two of us. He was the Attorney General of an entire state. I was the pastor of a small church in Milwaukee. He was famous—being interviewed on national television. I watched him, unknown, on my small portable T.V.

As I said, this was in the summer, and the show was a rerun. And at the end of this segment one of the anchors came on to tell what had happened to some of the people since they first reported the story. My friend, the attorney general, it turned out, was serving time in a federal prison for misuse of campaign funds.

I on the other hand was free to go out for a walk on a beautiful early evening in Wisconsin.

I laughed.

I laughed not with some sort of *schadenfreude* over my acquaintance’s misfortune. I laughed at my own foolishness for daring to compare myself with someone else, daring to sit back and judge my life instead of living it. I laughed because I was all too ready to declare success and failure.

I laughed because the situation could be described as ludicrous—that great word from the Latin *ludus*, to play. I remembered that when we invite God to *play* in our lives, we will often be surprised at the directions we take. And yet we will always be sustained through difficult times like trees planted near the water.

Blessed are you that weep, Jesus says, for you will laugh.

This is not the nasty laughter of revenge, the chuckle of glee that you give out when somebody gets just what *you* think they deserve.

It is the laughter of a joy that comes from understanding how much life does go on through difficult times.

It is the laughter of a joy that comes from understanding how much life does go on *beyond* the difficult times.

Blessed are you that weep, Jesus says, for you shall laugh.

These words don't brush the sorrow or the suffering aside. In some way they allow us to take our sadness and grief most seriously. For they remind us that God's power is constantly at work in the world and in our lives.

Think of the times that we weep:

Someone we love dies and the tears come. Sometimes right away. Sometimes several months later. Often both.

We see the pain of someone else—maybe we see it in the ongoing reports from Ukraine, maybe we see it in a son or a daughter. It hurts and we cry.

We run into one of those brick walls of life—failure, fear, the unknown future that serious illness can bring and find ourselves weeping.

Blessed are you, Jesus says. Blessed—that's how we translate that Greek word for "happy." But the word means even more than that. It suggests people who are the recipients of God's good gifts. It is a word that says God is for you, not against you.

Those times of great sadness are not times when we have been abandoned by God. They are times when, by entering that sorrow, we might discover the transforming power that we call God.

Blessed are you who weep, for you shall laugh.

This affirmation is at the heart of our faith.

And it is often difficult to hear. But down the road, there will be laughter.

These words speak of a divine reversal—we can't judge, because God is still at work. Sometimes the words of Jesus remind us that happiness is still ahead, allowing us to be drawn toward what we cannot yet see but can certainly hope for. It takes a leap of faith to do this, of course. But it is also a leap of faith to assert that sorrow or hunger or poverty will continue unabated.

Sometimes God's goodness is shown in those terrifying reminders not to be so absolutely certain about riches or fullness or gleeful laughter because they will not last.

And this is where these words of Jesus speak with strength to the situation in our nation and in our

world today—for there is a lot of wealth and fullness and glee—although I, for one, think much of it is misplaced and misguided. And these things are accompanied by the sense that this will be the case from here on out, which, of course, makes many people shudder.

You know that, like my theology, my politics are liberal—not progressive, because

I in no way think that things will always get better, but liberal. So, I often turn to conservative thinkers to help me. And helped I was, this past week from a *National Review* article that addressed the constant reversal of fortune that is American politics.

It said that there is currently in the MAGA movement a strong sense that “it is destined to win forever. This instinct is common. It is also extremely foolish. There is no such thing as a permanent victory in politics, and, given how uniquely restless the American electorate tends to be, there is rarely even such a thing as a generational advantage here. Once upon a time, George W. Bush’s reelection supposedly heralded disaster for the future of the Democratic Party. Just four years later, we were told that the Republicans had been reduced to a “rump.” In the time since that latter declaration, Congress has flipped between the parties many times, and we have had two Democratic presidencies (Obama and Biden) and two Republican presidencies (both Trump). Today, some are convinced that a new permanent majority has been born. It has not. It is indisputably true that Donald Trump has tapped into dissatisfaction with the status quo. It is not true that this talent inoculates him against traditional political dynamics. If he, too, becomes disdained, he and his party will be kicked out of office in the same way everyone else has been.”<sup>1</sup>

The promise of Democracy is that nothing is permanent, neither left nor right, neither Republican nor Democratic majorities. We might even say that this is the *blessing* of Democracy—for this very impermanence gives it life. And yes, this requires that we all do all that we can do to *keep* our nation’s Democracy and keep it *strong* in the face of so much that threatens it in these days so that the reversal of fortune continues as it should.

Let us, then, look for something beyond *our* wealth, *our* happiness, *our* success, something that can sustain as water sustains a tree even in times of heat and drought, with leaves that are green and much fruit.

I would be less than honest to suggest that these words of Jesus always make sense to me. Often when I try to understand them I can’t. The tears of you who cry because of grief, the tears of you who weep when you see the news, the tears of you who are poor, hungry, and hated are real. We can only hear the blessing if we listen as we cry. Still, once again this week those words of Jesus have come as both challenge and encouragement to me—to act and to move forward in hope.

These words are spoken in distress not to calm us down, to make us passively accept a bad situation but to give the assurance that God’s favor is with those who weep and that a reversal is certain.

If we can hear these words of blessing from where we are, perhaps we can work from that place to

fulfill the promise of blessing to all who are poor, all who are hungry, and all who weep.

Christ comes into our world, into our lives, bringing a reversal of fortune.

Ultimately, we see this in the Easter reversal of life conquering death. Resurrection is God's divine comedy. Resurrection invites our laughter as the powers that destroy are themselves destroyed.

May we laugh. And even when we cannot, may we be counted among those who are blessed.

<sup>1</sup> Charles C. W. Cooke, "In the Time of Peak Trump," [https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2025/04/in-the-time-of-peak-trump/?utm\\_source=PANTHEON\\_STRIPPED&utm\\_medium=PANTHEON\\_STRIPPED&utm\\_campaign=PANTHEON\\_STRIPPED&utm\\_content=PANTHEON\\_STRIPPED&utm\\_term=PANTHEON\\_STRIPPED&](https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2025/04/in-the-time-of-peak-trump/?utm_source=PANTHEON_STRIPPED&utm_medium=PANTHEON_STRIPPED&utm_campaign=PANTHEON_STRIPPED&utm_content=PANTHEON_STRIPPED&utm_term=PANTHEON_STRIPPED&)