

FOR YOU WILL LAUGH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

All Saints Sunday, November 4, 2007

Scripture: Luke 6:20-31, Ephesians 1:11-23

I can't remember whether it was a book or a short story but I think it was Umberto Eco who wrote it, that wonderful author of **The Name of the Rose**. Every chapter in the book began with a variation on the opening sentence and, so, started the story over again. Yet with each repetition a new layer of meaning was added, even though you had the sense that the story kept circling around.

Something of the same thing comes to mind in the sixth chapter of Luke's gospel, which seems to begin again the whole story of Jesus' public ministry. It's almost as if the first five chapters have been prelude to the sermon that Jesus preaches in the sixth chapter.

This part of Luke's gospel begins with the selection of the twelve apostles, who are chosen at this later stage rather than at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It's almost as if Jesus has field tested the best of the lot and then made his choices.

You don't find that in Mark's gospel. In Mark's version Jesus is still wet behind the ears from his baptism and newly tested in the desert by his temptations when he launches his career with the selection of a leadership team.

Luke, on the other hand has five chapters of miraculous deeds and amazing teaching, until at last he says Jesus went up to a mountain to pray, and spent the night there in seclusion. "When day came he called the disciples and chose twelve among them, whom he named apostles: Simon whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor."

In the earlier chapters Jesus had been portrayed as a teacher, a healer, a man of prophetic acts and remarkable deeds. The itinerant portion of the ministry was well under way.

Then along comes the sixth chapter, and it all starts over again. Why would he do that? Why would he start all over again? Unless, of course, he wanted us to pay special attention. To notice the Twelve and their special role, and to point to what was about to happen. Because what he does next is nail down the pure essence of what he is doing, who he is, and what he has to teach us. Luke says that they stood on an even plain. The crowds gathered there, and he began to teach them.

They came because they were weary in spirit and thought that he might give them rest. They came tired of foreign occupation and longed for the end of martial law. They came weighed down by what life does to you, the passing of days, the sadness of heart, the loneliness of time. They came sick, looking for healing; worn down, longing to be built up.

And they wanted to get close to him, press in on him, as if just being near him were enough.

So with the disciples and apostles near at hand he began to speak words of comfort and assurance:

“Blessed are you who are poor,” he said to these people who had nothing, “for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now,” he said to these whose stomachs were growling with hunger, “you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now,” he said to those of sorrowful heart, “for, in time, you will laugh. Blessed are you when they curse and revile you, for so they did to the prophets as well. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Unlike the other versions of the beatitudes, Luke couples these blessings with woes as well. Woe, in this case, like a warning. “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. Woe when they speak well of you for that is how they spoke of the false prophets.”

These woes and warnings are not so much a condemnation as an admonition that if this is all you want in life, you have your reward, but it will not be enough. If all you want is riches, in time you will find that riches are addictive. If all you want is a full belly, it will be no time at all before you hunger again. If life is nothing to you, you are going to find that the years pass quickly, and time takes everyone we love; even we ourselves will die.

What Jesus suggests is that there is more to life than riches, more than laughter and good food, more than cheap praise and ephemeral pursuits.

I was reading recently about what are now known as Aristokids, the kids of America’s newly wealthy aristocracy. Not old money mind you, but new money, recently acquired in the dotcom boom and hedge fund sweepstakes and merger wealth amassed in the big trades that we hear about all the time now.

At the University of California – Irvine, they offer a summer course for these late teen and early twenty something kids to learn how to invest, and manage the vast fortunes into which they are coming. In one recent class of about twenty students, the combined wealth of those 20 people was in excess of 3 billion dollars. According to one Robert Frank, a Wall Street Journal reporter, the greatest fear of their parents can be summarized in two words, Paris Hilton.

If old money was raised to be philanthropic, the kids of those with new money are simply accustomed to spending not saving, indulging not preserving, self amusement and creature comforts, not philanthropy or generosity.

“Woe to you who are rich,” Jesus said, for you have your reward.

Jesus offers a different view of life than the kind of life for which so much of our culture strives. He announces a kingdom that is drawing near in which there is justice and accountability. There, what seems afar off to others is known is recognized as nearer than we thought. What is not yet seen, is nonetheless envisioned and on the way.

In Jesus’ kingdom, what is valued now, will one day be of no value. And all that we treasure today will be reversed. The poor will receive the kingdom of heaven, those who are hungry will be filled, those who have been weeping will laugh.

It's not that Jesus has it in for riches or for those who have plenty, it's just they have their reward *already*. They need no more. But in God's kingdom those who understand their true poverty will gain everything, those who feel the deepest of hunger will be filled, and those who weep will ultimately laugh.

What strikes me about this is that it is such a central and key element in Jesus' message that he makes it the first sermon he ever preaches for the sake of his newly chosen disciples. It's as if he does not want them to be working under any false pretenses but to know from the outset what rewards will be theirs.

Recently I was talking to a professional woman, a bright, articulate, able and accomplished lawyer who was happily employed in her well placed job on the West Coast. A university president who had known her by professional association in the past, knew that her able gifts would help to make his presidency a success and he needed her for his leadership team.

He called her and said I want you to come and take a leading role in my administration. She asked him what her job would be. He said, "I'm not sure yet." Well, what would I be doing?" she asked. "I don't know," he said, "We'll make it up as we go along."

"Well what would my salary be?" she asked. "A lot less than you're making now," he said, "but you'll be doing something worthwhile." It didn't take long to decide. On just that much, she took the job, and has never regretted it.

In a sense Jesus gives that kind of talk to his disciples at the outset of his public ministry. He wants them to labor under no illusions. They are not signing on for wealth. There will be no high regard for them among the rich and powerful. There will be nights when they will go to bed hungry. There will be grieving along the way, not many laughs as the comfortable and well off laugh.

"What will I be paid," she asked? "A lot less than you're making now," he answered, "but you'll be doing something worthwhile."

"Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus said, "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."

"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, for so they did to the prophets who went before you."

We live in a pretty hard edged world, where what a person wears, what car you drive, on what avenue you live, where your kids go to nursery school and private school and college, and how many millions you have in your portfolio are used as measures of personal worth.

There is no getting around the fact that there is a reward for that, for worldly wealth and ease and comfort. The problem is that for those of us who are followers of Jesus, there is a larger view, a longer vista, a horizon that reaches much farther, and our values are often in conflict with the world's values.

I personally think that there is nothing more important for us to hear these days than these words of Jesus proclaiming to his newly deployed apostles and for all who would follow him, even us, that there is a truth at the heart of all truth, a justice that is better than the justice we imperfectly apply, a hope that is at the heart of all our hopes, a joy that even the whole Creation knows at its very core.

On this All Saints Sunday we gather at this table and remember that truth that is at the heart of all truth, we celebrate that justice that is better than any justice on earth, we take heart in that hope that is at the heart of all our hopes; that God's love has overcome all, even death itself, in Jesus Christ, and in him we have already begun the life that is eternal.

There are names on the list of the saints we remember this year, saints close at hand who are of dear memory and loving thought. Angus Duncan, a young father of two boys, who went out for a bicycle ride on a weekend trip with the family, and was gone in an instant.

Ruth Kerkovius, skeptic to the core, work camp survivor in World War II, her family taken from her and sent to concentration camps. She loved a particular café off Second Avenue where we would pass the afternoon discussing art and life, and painting, and people, and politics, and death and what is most difficult for you when cancer is eating you alive.

Baird Hastings is on the list, so fiercely independent, so tall, so elegant with his large bow ties. He wanted to read scripture well after his long legs grew unsteady, and he did so at his insistence, even though every now and then he almost tipped the lectern over, and sometimes himself as well. But never would he allow any of us to lend him an arm to steady him!

Bob Payton's name is there. Such a quiet man, so brilliant, thinking in paragraphs rather than sentences. A mathematician's mathematician, who kept the Bible by his bed and read it every night.

And John Korchak's name is there, an old marine. I shall never forget the honor guard out there at the cemetery that gorgeous day, two young marines in full dress uniform, so carefully, so slowly folding that flag. There weren't many of us out at the cemetery that day, just family. When you live a full measure of years, it's only the ones who have loved you most who are still able to stand there and do the honors and bear the memories.

Blessed are you who are poor, said Jesus, for you will inherit the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep, for you will laugh.

Our weeping turns to rejoicing in the confidence that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even death itself.

Some people so grasp this truth that even in the face of death they summon the courage to laugh, because of their confidence in God, that God will not forsake us, nor abandon us ever. Not in this life, nor in the life to come.

There has been so much cancer recently in this congregation, so much serious illness. You can understand why I was glad this week to come across a poem from a classmate of mine, Susan King. She lives in Minnesota, a mother, a wife, a friend. When diagnosed with cancer, her poetry started to focus on some of the issues that she experienced as a part of this new and insidious presence in her life. Her collection of poems has been published this year under the title, **One-Breasted Woman**. In one particular poem there is an amazing affirmation of the truth that is at the heart of all truth, that in Christ Jesus even those who mourn will laugh. The poem is entitled, “As Death Approaches.”¹

I can't believe I'm laughing!
I'd have sworn I'd be
shaking or sniveling.
And I sure didn't expect
a limousine.
I've never been in a limousine.
No biggy.
I've had better than fame.
Who needs the pressure?
As for fortune, I'm filthy.
That's why I'm laughing.
I've had so much:
the giving, the getting.
It's shameful.
It's embarrassing.
And it's too late.
No one can take it away!
And I've had the pain
to help me appreciate it.
Thank God for the pain!
Easy for me to say
now that I'm going!
But no, seriously,
the kicks in the teeth,
the gut, the rugs
pulled out, slammed doors,
setbacks, snubs.
Without them, I'd
never have recognized
Love, bedraggled,
plain eyes shining,
happy to see me.
Do I want more?
Of course I want more!
I always want more
of everything: money, hugs,
lovemaking, art, butter,

woods, flowers, the sea,
M&Ms, chips, tops, bottoms,
trips – I did give up drinking –
time, sure, and yes,
I'd like to see
my grandchildren,
if there are any.
I'd like to see my books
but more has never
been good for me anyway.
Enough – that's what I've
always needed to learn,
and is there a better way?
So this laughter
I had to work up to
through so many tears,
it just keeps coming
like a fountain, a spray.
Let it light on you
refreshment, benediction,
as I'm driven away.

Blessed are you who weep now, he said, for... in time, in God's good time... you will laugh.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2007.

¹ Susan Deborah King, **One Breasted Woman**. Holy Cow Press, 2007.