

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

Sunday, February 16, 2025

Sermon: What the Apprentice Wants

You may remember the old Disney chestnut *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, where the plucky Mickey Mouse, cast as a “personal assistant” to a powerful wizard, decides one day to forgo doing the chores assigned to him and use a bit of the magic he’s picked up from the old fellow. In a classic demonstration of “remember, you wanted this,” Mickey is eventually overwhelmed by what he has wrought, on the verge of literally drowning until the master appears on the scene and sets all to right.

We may hold that aphorism of “remember” in the backs of our minds as we ponder Luke’s version of what are more popularly known as the Beatitudes of Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus pronounces a series of blessings— “happiness”—to his audience that arise from the Kingdom of God. By contrast, Luke gives us a Jesus that announces both blessings and woes. Even worse, the woes are connected to those things that we would normally (naturally) say are signs of happiness. How can it be a blessing to have to scrounge, to have to scratch for a dollar? How can one be happy when the stomach is growling and empty? How can it be a problem if we have reason to laugh, or if we have a good reputation?

We hear these blessings and woes, and think that they are prescriptive—do this to get blessings, don’t do that so you can avoid woes—but on the lips of Jesus, these statements are not *prescriptive*, rather they are *descriptive*. Each sentence is a depiction life inside the Kingdom of God. The one who doesn’t have two pennies to rub together will receive riches which only the heavenly King possesses. The one who is hungry will be satisfied by a Father both generous and kind. The one who weeps and grieves will be comforted by the God of justice, joy, and love. In short, the sinner—the one estranged from God, far away like a prodigal—will be drawn close—because there is room in that poor sinner’s life for God to pour abundance.

By contrast, the person who is full, who is satisfied, who is content, who is joyous—what reason does such one have to look for God? What more can God give to someone who is already full? Why lift up a cry to God? Things are well! Do you see the danger—the very things that the world would call blessings are potentially sources of woe, of grief; that being full, content, powerful, or of good reputation means that there would be no place for God at all in our lives, that thinking we need the things of this world dulls us to our need for God, until the day comes and the things we think we needed drown us with the cry “remember, you wanted this.”

The danger of riches is still there if we want to acquire spiritual riches! The fact that we might give our wealth away, chase after hungry stomachs, seek humiliation does little if we expect that we will be filled with righteousness, blessedness, and all the so-called spiritual riches we crave! Fine, we won't be rich or strong in earthly ways; we will be rich and strong in heavenly ways, and then God won't have to worry about us. The rich have no sign, don't value the promise, and one day the deluge comes.

This contrast between blessings and woes in the Kingdom is a key to understanding the frequently misunderstood Lutheran slogan of "at the same time both saint and sinner." We think of sin in moral or ethical categories, asking "did I do something morally right or wrong" as if sin is a type of light switch that can be on or off. But sin is first and foremost about estrangement, about being far from God. Jesus comes to address the estrangement, to bring God close to those who are far from God. One of Martin Luther's more powerful statements addresses this:

This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.

And, so, it is a blessing to be poor—whatever your poverty may be, whatever your gnawing hunger may be—for the fact that you are hungry is both a sign that you need something and a promise that what you need can be provided. Such a person hears the invitation of Jesus to follow and keeps moving, keeps following, keeps trying to do that which the Son instructs. It is to be an apprentice where the goal is not acquiring the Master's power and using it for the self, but simply being glad that the Master is near. It is a daily dying and rising, recognizing that the sin that is the truth about me is giving way to the truth about the one who has me, the only Son. Both the sin and the Son are at work in you and me and the one will finally totally give way to the other. For Jesus himself is our blessing, our happiness, our beatitude.