

THE “BIAS” OF GOD?(Luke 6:17-26)

Faith United Church of Christ

February 17, 2019.

For almost three decades, the county fair of Sonoma-Marín County in California has sponsored a very popular competition called the “World’s Ugliest Dog.” Mohawked Chihuahuas, repugnant pugs and slobber-laden bulldogs parade their unsightliness before fair-goers and a panel of judges. In this competition, people are going great lengths to embrace ugliness – all for the title, “the Ugliest Dog on the Planet.”

In the gospel reading from Luke today, Jesus has gathered faithful followers and eager crowds on a level plain. He was teaching about how the realm of God is partially manifested in the present age. And, from my perspective, the way Jesus talked about it is kind of by referring to the social “ugly dogs” and the spiritual “ugly dogs” in our midst.

The gospel of Luke had Jesus preaching a sermon on a level place, on a plain, unlike the famously titled “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew. The word “level” in the Hebrew Scriptures often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation and mourning. AND, these same level places are also where Hebrew prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel foresaw the glory of God was bringing renewal to. In this Sermon on the Plain, Jesus speaks about the status, according to the values of the kingdom of God, for two different groups.

On the one side, there are those who are poor now, those who are hungry now, those who weep now, and those who are detested by their peers now. These one which society would consider as unsightly, the social ugly dogs, if you will, Jesus said that they are blessed. On the other side, there are those who are rich now, those who are full now, those who are laughing now, and those who have peer respect now. Jesus regarded their status woeful, as if they are some spiritual “ugly dogs” in the kingdom of God.

The Jesus of the gospels can be quite odd, if not weird, isn’t it? Sometimes, he is almost nothing like the image of God portrayed in our contemporary American society. [Pause] We worship comfort in this country. We are not just satisfied with met needs, we want met desires as well. We want to be rich, well fed, happy and looking good in the eyes of others. What our society blesses as good, true and beautiful, this Jesus in Luke thought of

them as lacking, false and ugly. Instead, the social ugly dogs are in the “blessed” category – those who are poor, hungry, those who weep now, and those who are reviled.

This outlook seems to go against “common sense” in our culture. Are not these exactly the situations that we strive to avoid in our lives? If you would recall the New Year’s resolutions you made just last month, how many of you hoped for a 2019 with increased poverty, hunger, grief? Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.” That would include being the kind of Christians who dare to say Jesus is on the side of those that the majority and the powerful in our society detests.

This passage can be difficult to hear, when we struggle to discern our place among these blessings and woes. What is so woeful with wanting to own my home? To finish putting my children through college? To having a stable well-funded retirement account? One may think: I try to be a good person and a good neighbor. I work hard at my job. I deal honestly in business. I pay my taxes. I have been responsible in supporting my family and using my skills and talents.

The Bible is rich with texts that recognize wealth as a sign of God’s blessing. AND, the Bible is also full of texts that clearly warn against the dangers of prosperity – about how wealth may lead the people of God to forget the God who gave them (Deut. 11 & 32).

Now when Jesus said blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weeps now, I do not think he means that those who are suffering injustice should just accept their status as good for their spirit. Or that people who are suffering hardships should not be given support. Rather, Jesus is proclaiming the values of the reign of God here. He is saying that it is the will of God, or the dream of God, for the lowly to be lifted up, the hungry to be filled, the grieving to be comforted and the marginalized to be respected. Jesus offers a radical word of good news to the poor, the hungry, the broken-hearted and the excluded.

For those of us who are not poor, we may not necessarily consider ourselves as rich. BUT many of us do have something rather than have nothing at all. And so when we hear Jesus said “woe to you who are rich,” OR you who have something; “woe to you who are full,” OR you who are not hungry; “woe to you who are laughing now,” OR you who are happy [pause] ... many may be baffled by Jesus’ apparent bias toward the poor, the hungry, the sad and the excluded.

That God favors the poor can also be difficult for some to accept, especially if they mistook it as implying the poor are morally better than those who are not poor. In my experience, the poor are more often treated as morally suspicious than not. And this is made worse by popular theologies that believe poverty and suffering are indications of unrighteousness and displeasure in the eyes of God. These beliefs imply that the poor, the homeless, the addicted are, if not a bad person, have at least chosen to behave unwisely. Or, people are poor because they are lazy, and do not want to work. Or, they have been stupid with their money and makes bad choices with regard to their lifestyles. Or they are especially cunning, and try to take short-cuts and cheat, but get caught. BUT, are these behaviors ONLY found among the poor? And you have never EVER seen the not-poor, the not-bad-looking, the well-educated behave in this way?

That God prefers the poor, the hungry, the excluded go against these popular theologies of prosperity and righteousness. It is a strong NO to any superficial understanding of poverty, suffering and God's justice. This apparent bias of the love of God has nothing to do with whether people are "good and deserving." It has nothing to do with those who are not poor. I don't think a loving God totally ignores one effort to live a decent life, but it is not always about those who already have something either. God favors the poor, the hungry, the grieving and the detested simply because they are in situations that is contrary to God's will for human flourishing. The ultimate reason for their blessed status in the eyes of God is not based on who they are, but on who God is – a loving God whose focus on the least among us do not take away any love God has for all of us.

In her book *Wealth as Peril and Obligation*, Sondra Wheeler points out that in the New Testament we learn that "material wealth is problematic because it is often a hindrance to heeding the gospel; it is dangerous because it is a temptation to the sin of false worship; it is suspect because it is frequently the result or the means of social injustice; finally, its disposition is a matter of great moral weight, as the response to human needs is a sign of the advent of God's kingdom and a test of the love that identifies Jesus' true followers."

Remembering that God's focus on the poor is ultimately about the love of God for all, we can ask ourselves these questions, "Do we find ourselves 'free enough' to hear God's call, whatever it is, or are we too encumbered by the things we own, and desire? On what basis do we make decisions about where we work, where we live, and what to do with our time? What do these

decisions reveal about the central values of our lives, and how do they contribute to reinforcing them? To what extent does our material prosperity rest upon and help to perpetuate unjust structures and institutions? Can we justify the present allocation of our material resources in light of those in need?"

For any one trying to follow the way of Jesus, there will probably always be a struggle to find a "faithful relationship with money". We live in a culture that says, in a thousand ways, "You are just one purchase away from happiness." As disciples of Jesus, we will continue to struggle to resist such temptation. And so, let us encourage one other with Psalm 1: to firmly plant ourselves like trees by the living source of all that is God, from whom all our resources come, and in whom we entrust all areas of our life, including our economic life, so that we may truly bear fruit for the common good. AMEN.