

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2025
SERMON "THE MIDDLE CLASS DISCIPLES"
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 6:17-26
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Luke 6:17-26

17 He went down with them 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, **18** who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, **19** and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

20 Looking at his disciples, he said:

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

21 Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

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

22 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.

23 "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

24 "But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.

25 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.

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

Sermon: The Middle Class Disciples

Jesus' Beatitudes, which is often what this sermon is referred to as, is known as the greatest sermon of all time. The audience listening to Jesus were people who were tired of being oppressed under the weight of the Roman Empire – demeaned for their Jewish identity, taxed maliciously on their meager incomes, and their sacred spaces and traditions constantly violated by their pagan overlords. As the text illuminates, many of them were suffering extreme illnesses without the resources to overcome their plights because people with leprosy, mental illness, or other “unclean” status were excluded and marginalized under the ruling Jewish authority. Across the audience listening to this sermon were people from all walks of life who felt lost and forsaken by the worldly elites ruling them, both Roman and Jewish. Jesus' words of comfort and empowerment for the marginalized were revolutionary and inspiring to those listening to him.

Yet, it would be an oversimplification to say that Jesus' words were only for the poor and oppressed. The reality of suffering and resilience is more complex.

At the Plaza, we're currently covering the topic of suffering in conversation with the biblical book most intimately related to it – The Book of Job. Last week, we covered something called “Liberation Theology” centralized by an author named James Cone. “Liberation Theology” was borne out of experienced oppression in Latin America, starting with the ideas of activist Che Guevara and refined by theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and Oscar Romero. The concept is based on God's “preferential option for the poor,” and is strongly rooted in Jesus' Beatitudes from Luke 6.

James Cone, the author we covered at Bible Study, took the Liberation Theology movement from Latin America and developed it within the context of the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and '70s. In his books, which are unified in their theology and call to action, he repeats that Jesus came for the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering, and he issues a powerful critique of predominantly white, middle-class churches that have historically been complacent in the face of social injustice. He makes the striking claim that if Jesus came back today, he would take the form of the most marginalized identity in our society, such as a homeless, disabled, Black lesbian.

At our Bible Study, my description of Cone's Liberation Theology evoked some reactions, particularly around his idea—again, based on the later verses of Jesus' Beatitudes—that churches like ours are accountable for how we respond to suffering and injustice. The reaction was strong to Cone's exhortations because people who are middle class and reasonably content experience suffering and adversity too; suffering's

not an experience reserved only for the most destitute of society. A middle class housewife experiencing depression after multiple miscarriages, or a white infantryman with a gambling addiction, might find Cone's theology flippant of their own struggles. However, the reason I brought Cone's concepts up in conversation with Job's suffering is to ask us honestly: does Jesus mean that those who are joyful and content are condemned by God?

In my seminarian years, I was certainly attracted to this concept, as were many of my contemporaries. The disdain among younger generations for churches that we perceived acted as judgmental social clubs while so many around the world were oppressed and suffering seemed like a slap in the face to the Beatitudes. Yet, as I matured in my faith and deepened my understanding of scripture, I found that Cone's argument—though powerful in its advocacy for justice—ultimately narrows the full picture of who Jesus was and who he came to save.

If Jesus' mission was exclusively for the most oppressed, then why did God not choose to incarnate as the most marginalized identity in first-century Palestine? Jesus could have been a Samaritan woman with leprosy—an outcast in every possible way. But he wasn't. He was born a Jewish man, the son of a carpenter, in a trade that allowed him to work with his hands and provide for his family. He was not among the wealthiest elite, but neither was he destitute. He was not a Roman slave, nor a foreigner, nor disabled. He was an ordinary Jewish man, socially positioned in a way that allowed him to be taken seriously by both the poor and the powerful.

The disciples he called reflected a similar reality. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen—a respected, hardworking profession that provided for their families but still left them vulnerable to economic hardship. Matthew was a tax collector, likely wealthy but despised for his role in Roman taxation. Jesus' inner circle was not comprised only of the poorest or most disenfranchised members of society but of men who represented a cross-section of the working and middle classes of his day.

Jesus' ministry consistently prioritized those who suffered, healed those who were sick, and elevated those who were despised. But if God's only mission was to the poor, then why did Jesus spend so much time at dinner tables with tax collectors, Pharisees, and even Roman officials? If he came to overthrow the privileged, why did he engage in deep theological conversations with Nicodemus, a respected religious leader?

If we look at the Disciples, we see that being middle class or reasonably content is a gift that God uses. He understands that those of us who were like the Disciples or even the Elite like Nicodemus have a perspective of experiencing God's blessings of joy, love, and peace, while also sharing the universal struggle and strife that is intrinsic across all human experience. Churches couldn't exist without the financial and volunteer

resources of the stable, and likewise they can't exist without the encouragement of the poor and brokenhearted. The Beatitudes were spoken for the hopeless to find hope, and also for us in the middle and upper classes to recognize and use our gifts in ministry, rather than tear them down or condemn them.

Cone's assertion that Jesus would return today as a homeless, disabled, Black lesbian reflects an important truth: that Jesus identifies with the suffering and the marginalized. But Cone's error is in making exclusivity out of that identification, as Jesus himself wasn't extremely marginalized and nor were his Disciples. The Beatitudes make clear that Jesus didn't *want* people to identify with their victimization, but instead, encourages them that they can actually be freed from that status. The message of the Gospel is not about God overthrowing the privileged in order to replace them with the oppressed. Instead, it is a call for those in power to use their positions and resources effectively to lift up the poor and empower them in Christ, so that the whole world may experience the Kingdom of Heaven together.

And this is where we, as a church, must take the Gospel seriously. If we are content, if we are stable, if we are in a position to give—then we are the ones called to be the hands and feet of Christ. We are not condemned simply for being comfortable, but we are accountable for what we do with that comfort. The message of the Beatitudes is not to despise the well-off or drag them down, but to call them into action.

Churches like ours aren't places that are meant to solely deepen meaningful relationships among friends who are socially alike, although that is one wonderful aspect of church. We are also and primarily called to reach out to those who aren't like us—the young person who is struggling with suicidal thoughts, the sick elderly person who has lost all their friends, the homeless drug addict who can't figure out how to get out of their cycle of despair. We're meant to reach out to those who haven't experienced the joy and freedom that we find in Christ and share the good news, so that we can empower them into having all the joy, hope, and love that we share together here—not in spite of us, but alongside us.

Jesus did not preach a Gospel of division, where the poor are automatically righteous and the comfortable are automatically condemned. Rather, he presented a vision of the Kingdom of God that calls all people—rich and poor, powerful and powerless—into alignment with God's justice and mercy. The Kingdom of God is not a war between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, oppressed and oppressor. The Kingdom of God is a table where all are invited, where those who have much share with those who have little, where healing is offered to the sick, and where grace is extended to all who will receive it.

Like the original Disciples, we have the important experience of both enjoying the blessings God places in the world while also understanding the suffering that exists here. In the Beatitudes, Jesus doesn't condemn us for this, but instead challenges us to ask: Are we using our gifts of relative stability and contentment—not to serve ourselves but to empower and uplift the suffering? That is the question of the Beatitudes. That is the challenge of the Gospel. And that is the work of the Kingdom we are called to build.

Amen.