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Luke 6:17-26
Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
I Corinthians 15:12-20

February 17, 2019
The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

When I was in seminary, we spent countless hours deconstructing the roots of poverty and oppression and discrimination. We looked at systematic racism and gender inequality. We considered religious texts from a wide range of perspectives from feminist to liberationist to prosperity gospel. Rarely did we not think about power and how sacred texts had been misused to create systems of injustice.

We used a lot of big, theological sounding words. We quoted activists and preachers from Martin Luther King, Jr to Bonhoeffer and, of course, Jesus. Our ideas for change and our aspirations for a better world seemed perfectly reasonable in our eyes. Because we were on the right side of justice.

And like many students, we were idealistic. Quick to point out the problems and assured that because we wanted to be a part of the solution, that we couldn't also be part of the problem. We were the good ones. Right?

One semester I took Preaching and Worship...that course that taught us how to preach with conviction and love, how to communicate with compassion and inspiration...and overall, how not to be boring. For one assignment, we were placed into small groups and charged with creating a full worship service for the seminary. My group got the Tower of Babel for our guiding text. You know the story when a group of people in Genesis decide to build a city and not just any city but a city with a huge tower that would reach up to heaven. God was so upset at the people's desire for power and greatness that God confused their languages and spread them over the world.

So for our service...we had the perfect setting. Our chapel had moveable chairs and a balcony. We chose to redesign our worship space. We turned all of the chairs around so that they faced the balcony. As students arrived they were randomly seated...some in the balcony, some on the main floor of the chapel. The idea was to recreate our own tower within our worship space. Little did the students know when they were seated that some would be the tower builders (those up high) and some would be the people left behind (those on the ground) – the have and have nots. The powerful and powerless.

I preached from down below – voicing the pain of the poor, the hungry, the sick. Another student preached from the balcony – voicing the opinions of the rich, the satisfied, the comfortable. The central question was this – who are we building our symbolic towers for?

Really, it's the same question that Luke is asking this morning in our Gospel text. But Luke takes it a step further...and asks us to consider when have we gotten so comfortable in our own lives

that we forget about those who are struggling? Remember blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the hated. What are you doing for them?

I like the juxtaposition of Luke and the Tower of Babel. The tower built by greed and the desire for glory that gets so consuming that the builders have only one goal in mind...their own well-being. They stopped looking around.

I said these words in my sermon at seminary...

Hey, you there in the tower! Stand up and look down! What do you see when you look down upon those of us on the ground? Do you see the hungry, the abused, the broken? Don't you realize that it is the sweat of the hungry that makes your glory a reality? A glory which has proven so isolating. Don't you realize that it is the desperation of the broken below that built your tower? A tower which has proven so empty. And while you live comfortably up there, looking down on your fellow human beings do you ever allow yourself to ask – aren't those down below created in God's image, too?

Well, the discomfort in the chapel that day was thick. Those up in the balcony shifted uncomfortably in their seats. You could see the disapproval on their faces because the finger had been pointed at them. They didn't like being the subject of such a strong accusation.

You can imagine the comments we got afterwards. The students who sat in the balcony were quick to write in their review of our worship experience that it was too confrontational. That they would have preferred to have a choice of where they sat. That they didn't like being called out (even symbolically) for actions that they felt they had not been a part of. Remember...we were supposed to be the "good ones" in seminary...the one's pointing out disparity, not the ones creating it.

I learned two important lessons from this exercise. The first is that none of us wants to admit our shortcomings. Like the students who wanted to choose where they sat that day, we like to believe that we are on the right side of goodness at all times. It was fascinating to see it play out...the students in the balcony (our symbolic tower builders) were so uncomfortable that it was easier for them to claim a spot down below with whomever was suffering than to reflect on their own sins. They were supposed to be the ones calling out the injustice, not creating it. But all have fallen short of the glory of God. That's tough to own.

The second thing I realized is that it is a luxury to choose where you want to stand. The people down below, the one's who suffer, don't get a choice. Do they? If they did, they wouldn't be hungry, they wouldn't be sick, they wouldn't be poor.

This is what Luke is trying to communicate. Luke challenges us to look at our priorities and our sinfulness and asks us to consider who we are serving. Are we serving God and loving all of God's creation or are we focused too heavily on our self and our own well-being while ignoring the needs of others?

It's a simple question with extremely challenging answers. Because at one time or another...we have all stood in our own towers – like it or not. We have all fallen short of who God desires us to be. We have forgotten those who are in need. That's not finger pointing, it is, however, the kind of self-reflection that Luke calls us to do. Where have we turned a blind eye? Where have we been afraid to take a stand? Where have we convinced ourselves that someone else will come along and do the work we would rather not do?

But Jesus calls us to stand on level ground...together. Because when we stand together – when we do away with our towers, when we take off our blinders we begin to see one another. The rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the hungry and the satisfied. We begin to see what we can share, how we can help, what we can do to insure that we do not become separated by greed or ignorance or fear.

Luke calls us to look around and look within. Luke tells us that Jesus came down to be with the people. To connect, to know, to love, and indeed to bless. Luke calls us to that same kind of community. A community built on relationships, not riches; on abundant grace, not scarcity; on joy, and not on sadness or grief.

Look around, look within. Look to one another. Amen.