

Unlikely Blessings Luke 6:17-26

Black History Month

February is Black History Month. It's a time to reflect on the history of African Americans and to honor the individuals and groups who have worked tirelessly toward racial justice. Celebrating Black History Month is necessary because history is often written by those in power. Winston Churchill said, "History is Written by Victors." "It implies that history is not grounded in facts, rather it's the winners' interpretation of them that prevails."¹ So often, the voices from the oppressed have been silenced and the cries of the disinherited have been unheard. By celebrating Black History Month together, we are not only listening to the extraordinary stories of achievements by African Americans, but we also try to break our own prejudices or internalized racism in order to become true friends and neighbors. It is a small act of participating in God's mission to break down barriers between people.

Jesus and People

In today's scripture, we see Jesus who was a boundary breaker. After he chose his twelve apostles on the mountain, he came down and stood on a plain. He was surrounded by his disciples, and soon, he was joined by a huge congregation from all over Judea and Jerusalem, even from the seaside towns of Tyre and Sidon. It means that both Jews and gentiles were gathered together around Jesus. Typically, Jews and gentiles didn't get along well with each other, but they stood together around Jesus. They had come to hear Jesus and to be cured of their diseases. Everyone was trying to touch him—so much energy surging from him, so many people healed!

As I meditated on today's text, I tried to imagine what was happening and I don't know why, but an image of the Newport Jazz Festival came to my mind [ppt]. Have you ever been there? People are packed together while standing at the concert. People in the crowd shout, clap and maybe dance with excitement. I imagine that what happened on that plain might have been similar to this. The crowd might have become excited when they heard about the good news for the poor, the proclamation of release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind. They might have been filled with joy, clapping and saying "Amen!," when they saw Jesus heal the sick and cast out unclean spirits. They knew the healing power came from him so everyone was trying to touch him.

Imagine you are in the crowd and you are sick. I mean really sick. Do you think you could get through the crowd to touch Jesus? I don't think so. You may just helplessly lay down on the ground while those who are capable to move their bodies rush to Jesus for healing. According to the Scripture, "all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them." The power that came out from Jesus healed ALL OF THEM! What does it mean? I feel that Jesus didn't just stand and wait for people to come and touch him. Rather, he got through the crowd and reached out to the sick one by one. Jesus didn't wait to be touched but Jesus first went down to the sick who could not move their body and extended his hands so that they could touch him and be healed.

This is good news for us. Jesus doesn't wait until we become capable of coming to him. Rather, Jesus, our Lord, first comes to us. He doesn't mind lowering himself to us and gives his body to be touched. In fact, he gives his body and sheds his blood for us and we celebrate this

¹ <https://www.quora.com/Where-did-the-phrase-history-is-written-by-the-victor-come-from>

divine love during our communion. This is a blessing we have experienced and grace that is freely given us. There is no prerequisite for receiving the love of Christ.

Jesus first stood with people on a level place and then he lowered himself to those who could not raise themselves so that they could touch him and be healed and stand with others. Jesus didn't care if they were Jews or gentiles. He didn't care if they believed in YAHWEH, the God of the Israelites, but went to them and healed them with the great love of God. To Jesus, race didn't matter. Ethnicity and gender didn't matter. What mattered to him was God's unconditional love for the poor and compassion for the sick. That love healed people. That love freed them from false prejudice against them and made them whole again. The same love that has made us whole. Amen?

Then he looked up...

Jesus felt their suffering and suffered with them. Because Jesus fully embodied God's love, Jesus didn't just wait until they stood up on their own and came to him. Rather, Jesus lowered himself to the ground and reached out to those who had their backs against the wall. And what did Jesus do? He broke the wall that confined their body and spirits.

Jesus looked up because he was down there with the sick and the oppressed. Filled with compassion, deep sorrow and holy anger, Jesus looked up and said, "Blessed are you who are poor, 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... But 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." Jesus turned upside down the conventional understanding of blessings in his time.

In ancient Israel, poverty and disease were considered signs of God's punishment for sin while health and wealth were seen as God's blessings. This meant that the sick and the poor doubly suffered. On top of the pain and struggles of their physical ailments, people sneered at them and discriminated against them as unclean sinners. It's similar today. According to a news article, Americans considers poverty shameful. People look down on people who are poor, so people do not want others to know if they are in need. Also, Americans often assume that the poor do not work and believe that most welfare recipients would prefer to stay on welfare than earn a living.² These are common myths in our society that doubly marginalize the poor.

According to a report, African Americans born poor are much less likely to move up the income ladder than those of other racial groups because of "educational inequalities, neighborhood effects, workplace discrimination, parenting, access to credit, rates of incarceration, and so on."³ Our society has stigmatized African Americans as if they themselves are the cause of poverty and dehumanize them. In addition, poverty and poor health are inextricably linked to one another. Racial and ethnic inequalities in COVID-19 mortality have shown this fact. While African Americans have made great sacrifices and contributions to the United States, people often refuse to see them. The perpetual effect of dehumanizing and stigmatizing them have damaged self-esteem and identity. Where is Jesus? And where are we?

Where are we?

² <https://www.salon.com/2021/08/23/why-americans-hate-and-fear-the-poor-joanne-samuel-goldblum-on-the-price-of-inequality/>

³ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-inheritance-of-black-poverty-its-all-about-the-men/>

Jesus did not look down on the poor and sick or ask them to stand up to be healed. Jesus lowered himself so that they could touch him, feel the warmth of his hands and the healing power of God's love. Jesus looked up to his disciples who still looked over the lowly and proclaimed woe to them, pounding on the wall the rich and the powerful had built to protect themselves. Jesus broke the wall so that those who had their backs to the wall could be freed, empowered, and stand again. If the beatitudes in the Gospel of Luke make us feel uncomfortable, it may mean that we are still standing over and looking down from above. In a provoking way, Jesus invites us to lower ourselves and be true friends to all. It doesn't sound like a blessing, but it is an unlikely blessing. We need to break barriers that separate us and hinder us from being neighbors to others.

In his book, "Jesus and the Disinherited," Howard Thurman wrote, "Every man is potentially every other man's neighbor. Neighborliness is nonspatial; it is qualitative. A man must love his neighbor directly, clearly, permitting no barriers between." Jesus showed a way to be true neighbors. He has first become our friend and invites us to be friends to all, especially, those who are often neglected and marginalized.

Black History Month is a small effort to break the wall that has separated us from our African American brothers and sisters. The first step to being neighbors is listening to their stories and recognizing them as God's children, regardless of skin color or socio-economic status. Listening to their amazing stories of resilience in the face of racism, stories that come from their deep spirituality. We will then realize that we are not breaking the wall for them but they have already been breaking walls for all of us.

In fact, Jesus Christ has already broken the wall between us through his body and has already made us one family in Christ. Let us accept this blessing and enjoy this blessing of being together in Christ. Amen.