

"The Anguish of Today's World"

Psalm 14:2-7; Luke 6:17-23

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 4, 2015 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost -- Rev. Ronald Botts

A quick scan of yesterday's paper showed these stories among the headlines:

Guatemalan Landslide Buries Town; 600 Missing
Shooter Dies in Oregon; Kills 9, Wounds 7
Widespread Floods Loom Along East Coast
Indonesian Plane Vanishes from Radar, Presumed Down
Teen Convicted of Plot to Kill Police Officers
769 Religious Pilgrims Die in Stampede
Smugglers Endanger Desperate Migrants

Life isn't easy today, and sometimes it seems that conditions are getting worse all the time. Anguish and discouragement seems to be at all-time highs. Yet, this may not be such a new situation as we take it to be... though it's hard to have much perspective on a age when you're living through it.

No time period has been without its tragedies and problems. No people anywhere or at any time have been immune from distress. Calamity by chance or at the hands of individuals is evident throughout all of history. We only have to look at our text from Luke today to understand this.

Men and women drawn to Jesus were most often those who were suffering. They were troubled and confused, unsure of today and even more uncertain of tomorrow. Jesus identified with their anguish and pain. It is they whom Jesus addressed in the beginning words of what we commonly term the Sermon on the Mount.

He said to them, "You are blessed," but they didn't feel blessed. They were tired and discouraged, beaten down by life. They were sick of body and soul. They contended with oppression and persecution. They felt powerless against all the forces conspiring against them. Just struggling with getting through the day was all they seemed able to do. Yet, Jesus said that they were blessed. Some of them must have laughed. It was so absurd as to be funny

Jesus could see their skeptical looks, but he didn't back off from his message. "You are blessed. You and you and you. You are the fortunate ones. You've been given a gift which is worth more than you know. You have it now, even if you don't realize it. I am here to make you aware.

"The world says to you that it is the rich who are happy, but I say it is you, the poor, who are blessed for you are being welcomed into God's kingdom, even now, where money and possessions have no value. Because of your outward poverty you will better know when

you have received inner riches. This wealth no one can take away from you. Blessed are you.

"The world says that it is the full of stomach who are content, but I tell you it is you, the hungry, who are blessed for a feast has been prepared which is unequalled and with a seat reserved just for you. Because of your emptiness now you will be abundantly satisfied when you are filled at last. The kind of food I bring delights the spirit. Blessed are you.

"The world says that it is the carefree who are favored by life, but I tell you it is you, the sad, who are truly blessed for God will comfort you and dry your tears. Because of your pain now you will recognize true enjoyment when you find it. This kind of happiness penetrates to the very depth of your soul. Blessed are you.

"The world says that it is the socially connected who are secure in life, but I say that it is you, the despised, who are blessed for the more you are reviled the greater you will be loved in heaven. Because of your endurance now the more you will enjoy the coming times of laughter and ease. This acceptance that God gives is deep and complete and free of human jealousies and bias. Blessed are you.

"You are truly fortunate because God knows and remembers each one of you. God is aware of your struggles and how you have been hurt. Those of you who mourn the loss of someone you loved—you are not forgotten. The Lord is also aware of all who have lived lives of peace and have practiced kindness toward others. There is nothing that God does not know. And if you think you are beyond God's mercy, and if you fear that God cannot care about you, then listen to what I have to say. I would not tell you this if it were not so."

The Beatitudes, or blessings, of Jesus turn conventional wisdom on its head. Here we are to understand it is the powerless and the marginalized, the suffering and the outcast, who are really first to enter the Kingdom. We would think it is the other way around.

Some religious folk would have us believe that those who enjoy the good life now are those who are the more favored by God. They tell us it is a sure sign that such individuals as they are among the elect. Jesus, however, would have us understand that outward circumstances have little to do with our relationship to God. In fact, the better we have it in life the more we are likely to estrange ourselves from the Lord.

You see, in God's Kingdom much of what we assume to be true is reversed: in our weakness is our power; in our hurt is our happiness; in our rejection is our acceptance; in our poverty is our riches; in our hunger is our satisfaction. Those who know they are not complete in and by themselves are more likely to recognize the real answer to their fulfillment. Those who can discern false gods are better able to distinguish the true God.

The Beatitudes are really promises—promises that we are loved just as we are, that we have companionship when we feel alone, that we are supported when we dare to take difficult stands, that we are comforted in our sorrow. Jesus says that it is these assurances that give us an abiding confidence for living and make it possible to prevail over our difficulties and disappointments—of which we all have some.

Friends, when God is with us, despair gives way to hope. When God is with us, we can make sense out of nonsense. When God is with us, our emptiness can be made full.

When God is with us—and we know it in our hearts—we are truly blessed whatever our circumstances of life. We find we can endure our challenges because we are surrounded at all times by God's love.

How do we know this? It's very simple. Because Jesus tells us, indeed promises us, that it is so. This assurance of Christ will get us through even the hardest of times and allow us to meet even the most challenging of days.