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When it rains . . . it pours . . . - Luke 6:17-26

It started with a fabulous birthday celebration in New York City with my friends and family. The following day my 2007 began a downward descent. My only living grandfather fell from his wheelchair and broke his hip, then proceeded to have a heart attack. His conditions snowballed from Sundowner's to asterixis to aspiration to neuropathy, his insulin was all over the place and he had to have someone with him 24/7. So I took some vacation to Nash General Hospital, where I spent sleepless nights trying to calm this hallucinating patient of mine. Once I arrived, I found that my grandmother had broken two teeth. How was I going to be with Pop and take care of her too? Matters got worse. News came in that my uncle who has been working for the government in Qatar, fell from a jet and cut his head. He had to have six staples in his head. Meanwhile, my mother who had bronchitis and a double ear infection was trying to look after my now also sick father. She called to say that she needed me. I had just ended my night time nursing shift. I had downed a snack and slept for an hour when she called to say that I had to go meet the ambulance at her mother's house. My other grandmother had fallen and broken her wrist. My vacation zone moved from room 379 to the E. R. where I would spend all afternoon and night before returning sleepless to my late nightshift duties on the cardiac floor. When my week of nursing duties ended, I returned home to find that my now emaciated cat either had cancer or an auto-immune disease and that a dear friend had been arrested for DUI. What else could go wrong? I began to think that life was turning around when my sister called to say that she and her husband were expecting their first child! Hallelujah! Just when I thought all was well, I was hit with a cold and the return of my debilitating headaches that have been in remission for the last three months. Finally, the last straw, my mother called again. My sister had lost her baby. When I have shared this litany of struggle with many of you, your response has been "When it rains, it pours!" Does it ever!

No one knew that fact of this human life better than Jesus. Day in and day out he was surrounded by people whose lives reminded him of the deluge of suffering that can come in our lives. As we turn to our scripture today, we find that Jesus has just been up on the mountaintop experiencing communion with God through prayer. There he has called out 12 disciples to dedicate themselves to ministry with him.

As they come down the mountain, to the level plain they find quite a crowd awaiting them, and this is where we hear these words from Luke 6:17-26:

READ SCRIPTURE

What we have here is basically, Luke's version of Matthew's well-known "Sermon on the Mount." Apparently, both Luke and Matthew drew their stories from the same source but Matthew expanded his version more than Luke. Matthew's also should be interpreted from a much more spiritual perspective. Luke is straightforward and is pretty much laying life on the line here.

So it is that Luke's Jesus finds himself in one of his favorite places, among the people who most need him. Jesus is most at home on this level plain because this is the place where he is fulfilling his purpose of being God's face to the world. The people have come from all over wanting something from him. Some want healing. Some want evils cast from them. Some just want to experience the energy that is Jesus. They want to know his power for they cannot know it on their own. This becomes a teachable moment for Jesus' disciples. This is what life as ministers of the gospel will be for them. This is what life will be like now that they have chosen to become as Augustine once said, "servants to the servants of God." Maybe this looks to them like sheer exhaustion. Everyone wants something. Everyone is in a taking posture. Everyone is feeling that same "when it rains, it pours" mentality.

It is at this point that Jesus turns to his disciples and basically says, "In the midst of this 'when it rains, it pours' mentality, you have two choices." You can be present for these needy people and really be servants or you can enjoy the world as it is.

We live in a culture that values choice number two and many of us are at this very moment wearing the scarlet letter, "G" for guilty. We are guilty of having lots of money and enjoying it. We are guilty of being well-fed and able to go to the refrigerator for whatever we want at even the slightest suggestion of hunger. We are guilty of laughing and enjoying the pleasures of this world. We are guilty of having other people speak well of us.

What's wrong with any of that you say? The other choice is not a smart option in this world. I mean really! Who would CHOOSE poverty, hunger, sadness, rejection and loneliness?!

So thought the observers of the cloth merchant's young son. Here was a young man who had anything he liked—the finest of clothes, the choicest of foods. He was a young nobleman ready to fight the necessary battles to which he may be called. While out fighting one of those battles, he contracted an illness that made him take into consideration what really mattered in life. He began to follow voices that he believed to be God-given. The voices led him to steal his father's cloth and use it to repair a worn down church. They led him to give away his money and fine clothes, to hug lepers and hunger with those who were hungry. The consequences were that his own father beat him and locked him away and people chalked him up to being crazy.

The man born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone chose a life of poverty, of hunger, of weeping, of being excluded and rejected.

By making such a choice, he learned some powerful life lessons. He learned that the thing about living in poverty is that poverty builds character. If you have ever known someone who has been impoverished at any point then you know there are certain unmistakable characteristics about them. They are humble and hardworking. They are strong. They have a hope that is unfamiliar to most of us. The thing about being hungry is that you begin to value the nourishment that was once yours. Your sense of gratitude deepens and there is a new succulence to every bite that life brings your way. The thing about weeping is that your tears begin to clear away cloudy vision and you begin to experience a kind of wisdom unknown to you before. The thing about being rejected and lonely is that you no longer have anyone that you have to please and the only place left for you to turn is to God who was always there in the first place.

Jesus wants his disciples to get that choice number two is certainly a much easier choice in this life but its consequences are rooted in self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency will always stand in the way of all things holy.

If these disciples wanted to be the ministers, the servants that they were being called out to be then they had to realize one very important lesson. When it rains hardship, we have the choice as believers to let it pour blessing.

The seeming sufferings of Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone landed him in the history books with a legacy that continues to change lives even now. We know him as St. Francis of Assisi—a man who when hardship rained in his life, chose to be a vessel that let the blessings pour.

It would be so easy for me to throw up my hands and whine, “Woe is me!” in the face of the seeming never-ending struggles that have come my way. But there is an Ojibway poem that reminds me that when “I go about pitying myself my soul is being blown by great winds across the sky.” Who wants that?

So, I choose blessing in the face of hardship and in so doing I realize that my week in the hospital was holy. It allows me to release my fears about my grandfather’s death and embrace a peace in being able to let my grandfather go whenever the time for him to pass. It lets me see the needs of my paternal grandmother who pours herself out for others and takes little good care of herself. Maybe there is something I can do to help that. It lets me see the physical and spiritual strength of my maternal grandmother in the face of excruciating pain and opens a new respect for her within me. It made a way for my uncle to come home to the United States and actually spend some time with his family. It has made me realize how much my parents have to juggle in this sandwich generation of their lives. It made me realize that I need to extend love more, even to my animals. It made me realize that God can transform our lives when we make mistakes and remarkable spiritual beings can blossom forth. It made me realize that ultimately our times are in God’s hands, so why do I continue to worry, fret, stress and press my way in the world. Today, I understand that when it rains hardship, the believer has the chance to let it pour blessing. So, I choose to turn my umbrella upside down and catch the blessings! What about you? Can you say it from your heart of hearts? Let it rain! Let it pour! I hope so! May showers of blessing be ours. Amen and amen.