Text: **Luke 6:17-26**

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

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If we have not yet had the chance to get acquainted, I am Pam Shellberg, the new Director of Life Long Faith Formation here at Bethel, and I just joined you on the first of January. I am new to the work here, but my position is also a new position. And, it is a mouthful, isn’t it? – Director of Life Long Faith Formation – which has made for some very interesting interactions with people. When I’ve introduced myself here and say what my position title is, I’ve gotten a few quizzical looks. When my colleagues introduce me, they still occasionally pause and say to me, “What is your title again?” As I’ve been getting reacquainted with old friends in Madison and they ask me about my new work, there is always a second or third follow-up question as they politely try to get a handle on what exactly it is I do. And, when I am talking to people outside the church – like when I have been setting up new utility and bank accounts – and I answer the question about my employment, there is often just a long, awkward pause, before they say, “Is there a shorter way to say that?” In many of these situations, I end up saying, “Well, you know, back in the day, we would have called it ‘the director of Christian education.’” That always seems to sufficiently clarify it. People are familiar with that role or they can at least more easily make some sense of it.

But those awkward pauses, the searching for words, and the struggle to describe the work all suggest that something that was once familiar and known has shape-shifted a bit and is no longer immediately recognizable.

The **work and mission** of the church that we alternatively call Christian education or faith formation – what exactly are we trying to get at in naming it? Is formation the same thing as education? What does it mean to form a faith? What does it mean to not use the word “Christian”? I’m not trying to split semantic hairs here – there’s a lot of overlap in the terms, to be sure. But they are personally important questions to me as I try to fulfill my obligations to you. And they might be important questions for us to think through together as the answers will reveal our understanding of what we believe the church is being called to do and to be.

I’ve always thought about **Christian education** along the lines of catechesis, of what we do with children and youth, in Sunday Schools and confirmation classes. It’s how many of us of a certain age or generation might remember our own Christian education. Learning Bible stories and working through Luther’s small catechism established our identities as Christians.

I’ve generally thought of **faith formation** in a similar way, although with a more nuanced focus on how people **of all ages** come to have experiences of faith in their interior spaces, not just in how they appropriate lessons about the bible, the ten commandments, the creeds, or the sacraments.

It’s not my job title, but I actually think a lot about **spiritual** formation – about how to create the spaces in which children and adults reflect on their actual lived experiences of God, something that is more about transformative, heart-centered experiences than learning that has an academic or “head” character to it.

But all these are the nuances of my own working definitions. What do **you** think we are talking about here? What is the work of Christian education or faith formation or spiritual formation in this place?

Again, I don’t believe we are splitting hairs. The distinctions are important – or at least important to make note of – because they say something about how we are making sense of the changes in religious life today – perhaps most sharply and poignantly here at Bethel, but also throughout North America. More and more people are “nones,” that is, when asked with what religious tradition they affiliate, they respond “none”; the millennials and Gen-Xers are absent from the pews; congregational life is changing as church attendance is in decline over all the mainline traditions.

To shift our language from “Christian education” to “faith formation” – whether or not we can clearly say yet what we mean by faith formation – is to say that we have at least some awareness that people today are seeking something different from us. And, it is also to say that we are intentionally leaning into an understanding that we ourselves are becoming something different than we used to be, that our identity as a Christian church is changing.

Now, this is not an easy thing; it is not a comfortable circumstance for many of us. We might be anxious at what often appears to be the disappearing of our faith traditions. Some of us hold on with a fierce and vigorous insistence that long-treasured forms be resurrected if not preserved. And while there might just be a bit of the “that’s the way we’ve always done it” energy in the mix – I wonder if it is more often the case that we associate our most profound experiences of spiritual enlightenment and deepening faith with those forms. Then, in our love for children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, and because we fervently want them to know what we have known – we are fierce in our commitments to the forms by which faith came to us. We know where we found God – and so we want to preserve it, conserve it, so that our beloveds – if and when they come – will find God there, too.

I share some of this worry and sorrow. I’ve been a church mouse my whole life. And now, I often sit in church and ponder, with no small measures of grief and confusion, how it is that the sacraments, rituals, liturgies, and hymns that have ordered my religious practices and defined my spiritual life do not speak to other searching hearts in the same way they always have for me. I still struggle when I am challenged to imagine different kinds of teaching and learning; I still struggle some when I am asked to imagine a different kind of future church – because I still don’t always know what to do with the reality that what for me has always been the taproot of my identity and purpose mean, at best, nothing to many others, and at worst signal to them things like my elitism, hypocrisy, or irrelevance. It breaks me a little bit. Breaks my heart.

And yet, while there can be anxiety over what seems like radical change, there is also no question that the gospel of God is being proclaimed anew. People have spiritual longings, deep yearnings, and great needs, which many of the traditional forms no longer meet. People’s hearts are still desiring God, no matter the state of the church. The desire for God is being expressed in new ways and with new words, and a spiritual vitality is being unleashed as transformed communities emerge as fresh expressions of what it means to be communities of faith.

So, this is our situation, this is where we sit today waiting for the good news of the gospel of God to come to us. And whether in our grief, uncertainty, and resistance, or in our hunger, longings, and passions – God comes.

When I learned that members of the Life Long Learning Ministry team, Dave/Betty and I, would be responsible for the first in a series of gospel proclamations by Bethel’s ministry teams, I right away looked at what the texts for the day were. When I saw that we’d be hearing the beatitudes from Jesus’ sermon on the plain, I thought, oh, this is just perfect! How perfect that the life-long learning ministry team will be paired with the New Testament’s most fulsome expression of Jesus’ teachings! But, while we will hear the whole of Jesus’s sermon as it is spread out as the gospel readings for the next several weeks, it turns out, the portion we heard today, is actually something like a prologue to the teachings, and it isn’t really teaching material at all – it’s a prophetic announcement. Jesus begins the sermon looking and sounding a lot like Jeremiah or Moses, very similar to them as they pronounced blessings and curses to the ancient Israelites in the Old Testament.

But really, the prophecy – and knowing that it’s prophecy – actually turns out to be key to understanding the teachings that follow.

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

Blessed are you who are hungry,

Blessed are you who weep,

Blessed are you when people hate you, and exclude you …

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven…

Jesus is not teaching here, and he is not saying that it is somehow more desirable to be poor, hungry, weeping, and reviled. In fact, the Greek word translated here as “Blessed,” carries more of a sense of “congratulations” or “yay you!” He is announcing that in poverty, hunger, sorrow, and experiences of rejection, God is already present with a promise – and in that promise is the confidence and hope for the reversal of our misfortunes. This is the foundation of the Lutheran understanding of the theology of the cross, and one of the most important things our tradition offers the world, powerfully articulated by the writer Belden Lane, who said:

 Divine love is incessantly restless until it turns all woundedness into health, all deformity into beauty, all embarrassment into laughter. In biblical faith, brokenness is never celebrated as an end in itself. God's brokenness is but an expression of a love on its way to completion.

Jesus announces that the kingdom is ours. He says, “congratulations – in your brokenness you are not outside God’s reach”; “Yay you! – in your brokenness you are held securely in God’s hand”; and “Blessed are you,” because you yourselves are making God’s presence known in these very circumstances.

Now the Old Testament prophets usually paired their announcements of blessings with curses. But Jesus breaks with that tradition. Instead of pairing his congratulations with curses, he uses a word that is an exclamation of sorrow. He says, “woe are you rich, woe are you who are happy and laughing, woe to who you are in good standing with others.” When Jesus says, “woe to you,” he is not judging them, but is revealing that he is perhaps grief-stricken for them.

The **prophetic** word Jesus speaks is this – and it is a hard saying like prophetic words always are – that in God’s kingdom, along with an assurance to the broken that they will be made whole, God also assures those who are whole that they will be broken. Of course, God longs to make us whole in our brokenness, but there is often something about our wholeness that has to be broken through – something about its fullness, its thick walls of defenses, its lines of security, how it has been calcified into codes and creeds and content – even something about its beauty that has to be broken through so that our vision for God is unobstructed. And there is grace in this. And, Jesus says, there will be joy.

Having announced that God’s kingdom appears in the circumstances of the poor, hungry, grieving, and reviled, Jesus then – and only then – goes on to say, – now, if you have listened – not just heard, but if you have listened and taken in what I am saying, you will not only belong to the kingdom, you will be the kingdom and it will manifest in you when you:

* love your enemies
* do good to those who hate you
* bless those that curse you
* pray for those who persecute you
* if struck, offer the other cheek
* give to everyone who begs
* do unto others as you would have them do to you
* do not judge or condemn
* forgive

But here’s the thing – I’m not always sure that I understand how this works exactly – do you? So many of those teachings seem counter-intuitive. Some seem kind of naïve. There’s a paradox in them that I, at least, can’t quite get my head around. They don’t really line up with my lived experience of my enemies, haters, and persecutors. Not judging others seems a physical impossibility.

I also wonder if we haven’t turned these teachings into mottos of Christian identity. We hear them as imperatives – do this, don’t do that; we hear them as judgements about right and wrong behavior; we’ve read them as moralisms. But Jesus isn’t offering platitudes. He’s not giving us rules to follow. He’s not giving us clues about what’s right and what’s wrong. He’s holding up a mirror to the places where we are broken and where we need to be broken. He’s inviting us into deep places where there are thoughts and feelings we don’t really want to talk about, because it is in those places, in real time, with our enemies and haters and persecutors – that we will be broken and blessed in that brokenness.

Jesus’ teachings invite us to a place beyond right and wrong, a place where we enter the experience of the challenge to love. Love our enemies – who do we see as enemies? In real life, in real time, with real people – what are the challenges to us to love them? Give to everyone who begs. My goodness, we have people here every day of the week, including today, who are begging from us – and the challenges around that ministry and the presence of the homeless here in our midst show us that giving to them is easier said than done. Do good to those who hate us? What is required of us – spiritually – to be persistent in doing good to them? Can we say, with fierce honesty, why and when and how we don’t really want to do that? That it doesn’t always make sense to us to do that? Then we are in the kingdom. We break as God turns our woundedness, deformity, and embarrassment into health, beauty, and laughter. We break open so that God’s love is made complete. We break open, and find that we leap for joy. Congratulations, says Jesus, yay you!

Here then is where we might get a little bit closer to leaning into being able to say what is our work and mission. Here is where we see the hope in specifically designating a Life-Long Learning Ministry Team, in the conscious decision to articulate our work as life-long faith formation, in the wisdom of the transition team to focus our vision statement as “Growing faith in Christ through learning about God and God’s will for us.”

Dave and Betty both bore witness to this in their proclamations, beautifully saying that:

* faith is not a noun, not an artifact to pass on – but an experience;
* faith formation illuminates our commitment to processes and experiences of deepening our relationships with God;
* we are concerned, not with passing on faith as a fixed body of content, but that we are passing on what Dave called “God experiences”;
* that faith formation is nurtured in community while it also nurtures the community;
* finally, faith formation is a process and it is life-long, because the discernment of God’s will is the invitation to joy given to us in every minute that we draw breath.

Rejoice in this day and leap for joy! Congratulations! Yay us!