

## “Opposite Day”

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our minds might be guided  
by your wisdom in all our discerning and know your truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Have you ever played Opposite Day? Do you know what I mean? That silly childhood game where you have to say the opposite of what you really mean? It's probably an overstatement to call it Opposite Day, because I bet no game of Opposite Day has ever last more than 20 minutes. If it's Opposite Day and I ask if you like cookies and would like to have one, you have to say, no, you hate cookies and you definitely don't want one, because of course, you love cookies and you really want to eat one. If I ask you if you'd like everyone to call you Silly Bunny, you need to say Yes, or we'll all start calling you Silly Bunny. If I ask you if you want me to pour ice water over your head, you'd better say Yes fast, or you might get all wet! In its most obnoxious form, Opposite Day isn't declared until the correct answer has been given, thus rendering the “right” answer the “wrong” answer, so something prankish can be justified by the one playing Opposite Day on an unsuspecting victim.

The one thing I will say in defense of Opposite Day is that usually it demonstrates how most people's instincts are honest. If someone asks you what you want, you tell them. The moments when Opposite Day are funny, when it's being played mutually, are when our instincts override our determination to win the game,

and we answer without translating our response into “opposite” first. But again, this game never last too long, in my experience. Saying the opposite of what you mean is exhausting after a while.

I bring all this up because sometimes scripture makes me wonder if Jesus liked to play Opposite Day. We may be more familiar with the Beatitudes from Matthew, the ones given in the “Sermon on the Mount,” rather than this extended mix from the “Sermon on the Plain” that we read today from Luke. Adding in those “woes” seems to up the stakes. But either way, it would be easy to read these verses and think that Jesus looked at the circumstances all around himself and then described the opposite of what he was seeing. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, and the weeping? Blessed are the hated, excluded, reviled and defamed? In what universe?

Now obviously, I know that the church has for centuries made sense of these blessings by leaning into the future tense offered in those solutions. “You will be filled. You will laugh.” But these are promises coming from a Savior who said “the kingdom of heaven is within you, near at hand.” This is the vision of a God who was not content to stay up in heaven, waiting for each of us to arrive in turn, but instead came and walked amongst us, taking on the burdens of flesh and mortality. I cannot help but think there is more than “pie in the sky, by and by” going on here. If Jesus is the incarnation of a God who spoke creation into existence (as our tradition tells us he is), these pronouncements of blessing and woe must promise more than a distant, eventual happy ending.

Jesus is doing something with these words. And it's not just playing Opposite Day. Words are powerful, you know. They do have the capacity to shape the world. If you want the poor to be blessed you must first convince the poor that it is possible that they could be blessed. But beyond that, you must also cultivate within the poor an expectation that they will be blessed, a sense of entitlement, even, to that blessing. Jesus was using his words to help the vulnerable declare within their very souls that the way things were was not the way they should be, indeed, not the way they would be. "You have seen that the rich receive all the rewards, but I tell you, it is the poor to whom the kingdom of God belongs." This is not a pacifying promise but a motivational memorandum. On the surface, the Beatitudes may appear to be invented nonsense, but at a deeper level, where they display the intention of God for our world, they are more true than whatever happened yesterday.

And that is what we must determine, when confronted with words or pronouncements that don't seem to line up with reality. What vision for the world do these words portray? Are they aiming to inspire or manipulate? For indeed, there are many pronouncements flying about these days that do not line up with reality. When a billionaire declares that programs that feed hungry children or provide medical care to sick people are corrupt and criminal, we need to consider what sort of world such a falsehood is designed to create. When a government official insists that only white, straight, cis-gendered men are truly capable of the work our country needs done while government policies are being re-written to reflect such a belief, we need to examine

what kind of agenda is being promoted. Who is this world being shaped to serve? Who is this world being fashioned to exploit or discard? How can we sort through all the claims being tossed our way to determine what is true and what is false? One way is to think carefully about why someone would make the claims they are making and follow those trails of motivation till they reveal more about what that person wants, what world that person is envisioning. We must be “wise as serpents and gentle as doves,” as Jesus warned, for as Voltaire warned, those who can make us believe absurdities can push us to commit atrocities.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live lives of truth and integrity. We can join with Jesus in projecting a vision for the world as it could be, in opposition to the way it is at the moment. But we cannot tolerate attacks on the church’s work to feed the hungry and heal the sick, attacks that imply that such compassionate practices are contrary to the common good. We cannot remain silent when church leaders are defamed and longstanding charitable institutions like Lutheran Social Services are accused of money-laundering.

A number of years ago, we had a children’s class called Truth Seekers. Last week, we were reminded of the importance of listening to children and cultivating within ourselves a child-like” openness to hearing God’s word for us. We must all be truth seekers. We must work a little harder to assess why someone is telling us what they are telling us. What sort of world are they trying to speak into existence? Does that vision for the world match the one Jesus has shown us? Or are they trying to

build a world where “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must,” as Bret Stephens reminded us the ancient Athenians insisted so many centuries ago, as they attacked a more vulnerable city that was just trying to stay out of the local conflicts? “You will know them by their fruits,” Jesus told us. Are the actions being promoted things that bless the poor and feed the hungry and comfort the weeping? Or are they heaping riches at the feet of those who have already received their consolation and mocking those who are barely making it?

As followers of Jesus, we must be truth seekers, but also truth speakers and truth defenders. We must dig deep to find the living waters that refresh our wisdom and courage, so that we might stand strong in the face of destruction and chaos. We must counter the narratives that uplift false prophets of cynicism and cruelty. We must proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, declaring God’s love for the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the weak. We must do it no matter what anyone accuses us of or defames us for. And lo, we may even rejoice as we do so, for Jesus has declared that we might. It may feel like Opposite Day, but we will be saying exactly what we mean, exactly what God has called us to proclaim. Hallelujah and Amen.