



“Jesus and the Lake Wobegon effect”

Luke 4:14-21

(A sermon by Rev. David Busker)

All of us want our kids to be above average. In late August the local paper talked about the fact that the high school seniors in our town scored lower than the average for Wisconsin but were above the national average.

A West Virginia doctor noticed sometime back that all 50 states claim that their students score above average on standardized test scores. That, of course, is impossible--for everyone to be above average.

Someone has even given this scandal a thoughtful name--*the Lake Wobegon effect*.

Lake Wobegon is author Garrison Keillor's mythical town where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

Obviously, by definition it is impossible for everyone to be "above average." Average is what most people are. Nobody, though, wants to admit it.

In a General Electric survey some years ago:

- The average person surveyed placed themselves in the 77th percentile. That is, their view was that their performance on the job exceeded that of 76 percent of their associates.
- In fact, only 2 percent of the respondents placed themselves as below average.

Everybody is in the top half of the class. Everyone is a star.

What has Jesus got to do with the Lake Wobegon effect?

Just this. How can I look across this congregation--we who have so much, who are so well-fed, so well-clothed, so surrounded by the good things of life--

How can I look across this congregation and tell you that Jesus came to save the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed? That's not us! We are winners.

We are stars. We're all above average. This is one text we can skip over. It's for someone else. Still, it's there. Maybe we ought to listen.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me," says Christ, "because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

What, if anything, is Christ saying to you and me?

Maybe we are poorer than we think.

Someone is silently saying, "You can say that again."

One poor fellow said he's so heavily in debt that he's known as the "leaning tower of Visa."

A secretary lunching in a local restaurant noticed a friend at a nearby table. Her friend was nibbling at a cottage cheese salad. "Trying to lose weight?" she asked.

"No," the friend said, "I'm on a low salary diet."

Some of us know about low salary diets. But we're not poor. Or are we?

Mother Teresa thinks so.

A number of years ago there was a beautiful article about Mother Teresa in Time magazine. She was asked about the materialism of the West. Mother Teresa said, "The more you have, the more you are occupied. But the less you have the more free you are. Poverty for us is a freedom. It is a joyful freedom. There is no television here, no this, no that. This is the only fan in the whole house...and it is for the guests. But we are happy."

"I find the rich poorer," she continues. "Sometimes they are more lonely inside...the hunger for love is much more difficult to fill than the hunger for bread...The real poor know what is joy."

When asked about her plans for the future, she replied, "I just take one day. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not come. We have only today to love Jesus."

Is there anyone in this room as rich as Mother Teresa?

A lay leader of a large suburban church stood to give her testimony.

"My husband and I had it all," she said. "All the good things that our society values. Good jobs, a nice home, vacations in the Bahamas. I now realize, though, how shallow and inadequate our faith was. I can remember when I picked out a church for us because it had beautiful chandeliers."

"Then it happened. Both of us lost our jobs. For over a year we struggled. It was during this time that we both came to know the goodness of God."

Did you catch that? In the midst of their struggle they “discovered the goodness of God”. But surely, God's hand was more apparent during the times of plenty?!

That's not how it works, is it? That is why Jesus warned us of the dangers of wealth.

Wealth deludes us into thinking that our strength is sufficient. At such times we are like General Custer at Little Bighorn.

One of Custer's scouts warned him they were in for a fight. He estimated there were enough Sioux to keep them busy for 2 or 3 days.

General Custer replied rather smugly, "I guess we'll get through with them in one day." He even declined help from the 7th Cavalry or the aid of Gatling guns. Well, Custer was right about one thing. One day was all it took.

So it is with us when we think that our resources can carry us through. We are poorer than we think.

And maybe we are not as free as we think.

Freedom is a paradox. There comes that time in life when we want to throw off the chains that have so long bound us--chains of parental supervision, chains of religious instruction and guidance, chains of conventional moral behavior.

We want to be free! That's part of the maturing process. Later, however, we notice a profound hunger for things that are lasting, things that are good, things that build us up rather than tear us down.

And we exercise our greatest act of freedom--the freedom to go home. This is the story of the radicals of the sixties and seventies, but to a lesser extent, it is the story of us all.

We may be poorer than we think. We may not be as free as we think.

And maybe we are blind as well. Marcel Proust once said, "The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

Jesus asked His disciples, "Having eyes, do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" (Mark 8:18) The rich man did not see Lazarus at his gate.

The Pharisees did not see that their attention to keeping the law was separating them from the rest of God's children. Even Jesus' disciples did not see that the Kingdom was not about power but about service.

And there are many of us who do not see. Husbands and wives who do not see the needs of their spouses, parents who do not see the loneliness of their children, successful people who do not see that their success has been won at the cost of their values.

Blind people—everyone. Until that day when Christ comes into our lives and helps us see. We may be poorer than we think. We may not be as free as we think. Maybe we are blind as well.

Certainly, we are oppressed. We are oppressed by our inability to free ourselves from the burden of sin.

Anyone who has ever struggled with a habit that resisted breaking,
Anyone who has ever left good resolutions unkept,
Anyone who has ever been cruel when they should have been kind,
Anyone who has ever been lazy when they should have been industrious,
Anyone who has ever been short-tempered when they should have been
patient—

Knows the oppressive power of sin.

And there is only one remedy for such oppression. And it is to accept the free gift of God's grace.

Many people struggle with addiction to alcohol and other drugs. They struggle because they are “above average” and should be able to fight off their bad habits and addictions. We should be able to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and overcome anything that happens to us.

Addictions and bad habits are very seldom cured overnight and by ourselves. God can heal us but many times we have to struggle with the pain of our mistakes.

"Come, every soul by sin oppressed," wrote the hymn writer, "There's mercy with the Lord..."

You see, Christ's message is for us--for in a very real sense we are the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed. We are those for whom Christ gave His life.

Deep in our hearts some of us have imagined that He must have died for someone else--the scum of the earth, perhaps, but not us. What do we need of a Savior? We're all in the upper half of the class. We're all above average.

Maybe so, but it would be good for us to heed His message once more:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on Me," says Christ, "Because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed...."

Friends, that's us. And, thank God, He has come.

You can overcome any addiction and habit with the help of God, organizations like AA and people who will stand by you. Don't be taken in by the Lake Wobegon effect. We are all in need of God's love.