

“Whoa to Woe”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 13, 2022 – The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

We gather here this morning on the sixth Sunday after Epiphany, a day perhaps better known in these parts as Super Bowl Sunday. Later today, many of us will be watching the big game and cheering on our favorite team or players or commercials. Some of us, even in these pandemic times, will be gathering with family or friends to watch the game while consuming food -- lots and lots of food! The National Chicken Council (and there is such a thing!) projects that, over the course of this unofficial holiday, Americans will consume 1.42 billion chicken wings. Other trade groups estimate that we will also chow down on 11 million pounds of potato chips and eight million pounds of guacamole. For many of us, the day is as much a celebration of eating an abundance of our favorite appetizers and snack foods for dinner as it is a day to celebrate the world championship of American football.

One of the traits of our American society that we witness on this Super Bowl Sunday, and also on every other day of the year, is that we love our food, like so many other things, not only in abundance, but in excess. And we consider having more than what we really need -- of food, shelter, money, and even security -- to be a sign of success, a mark of blessedness. By our standards, the guys we will be cheering on tonight (and I will be cheering them on with bratwurst in hand) are some of the most successful -- the most blessed -- among us. Many of the NFL players we will watch tonight have risen to the top of their craft through lifetimes of hard work, natural talent, and happenstance, and have attained hero status among us along with an overabundance of wealth, fame, and influence. In our world, where we measure the success of people by how much they gain, we place our heroic football players on pedestals, celebrate their great blessedness, and long to be successful as they are.

How strange to our ears, then, is Jesus' teaching: "Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who are hungry. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you when people hate you." We don't consider blessed people who are poor, hungry, mourning, or despised. We don't place those who are poor or hungry or are

otherwise lowly or desperate on pedestals, and we certainly don't long to be like them.

The teaching of Jesus, however, is that God does place the lowly on a pedestal. Because the lowly are in need of God's love, and have nothing but God's love to rely upon, they are especially esteemed by God and cared for by God. The poor are the object of God's attention.

As the living symbol of God, Jesus demonstrated this concern of God for lowly people by his actions: When people were hungry, he fed them, and when people were ill, he healed them. And it mattered not who the lowly were. As we read in today's lesson, he met both faithful Jews from Judea and Jerusalem and Gentile outsiders from Sidon and Tyre on the common plain, and it was there, among the common people of all kinds, that God's uplifting word and healing touch was given.

Following in this way of Jesus, I believe, is how we can say "whoa, whoa, whoa!" to our own woes as identified by Jesus: The woes of being rich (and all of us are privileged with riches, living in the richest country the world has ever seen); the woes of being beyond full with chicken wings, bratwurst, and other foods of our own choosing; the woes of having easygoing lives, full of Super Bowl parties and other forms of merriment and mirth; and the woes of being esteemed by others and placed on a pedestal by people. All of these signs of success can bring us woe not because they themselves are woeful, but because we make gods of them, elevating them in importance beyond God and other people and trusting in them more than we trust in God. Our wealth -- and our pursuit of it -- can pull our gaze off of God and others, especially lowly others, and cause us to pay attention to ourselves first and foremost.

However, when we pay attention not just to our own stuff, but upon the others around us, especially the lowly others, we can say whoa to woe. We say whoa to woe when we let the discomfiting disruptions and disease of a pandemic teach us lessons in humility and selflessness. We say whoa to woe when we take an active role in lifting up the lowly, by feeding the hungry as Jesus did and healing the ill as Jesus did, and so here we use our resources and work to gather resources to feed and bring health to many people in this community. We say whoa to woe when we show concern for those in the world whose lives are at risk

because of poverty or war or the threat of war, and so we lift up in prayer the people of Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ukraine. We say whoa to woe whenever we act out of compassion for the powerless here and everywhere.

So let us say whoa to woe, and let us make heroes of those among us who do the same. Let us celebrate not only our sports stars, but our servants. Let us teach our children to be like those who use their energies to give to others, people like our medical care workers and our civil servants. Let us look at those who use their wealth to lift up others and be inspired by them to likewise give generously.

May our prayer echo this daily prayer of one of the shining superstars of our era, Teresa of Calcutta: "Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with your spirit and love. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of yours. Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel your presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus. Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine, so to shine as to be a light to others. Amen."