I’m quite glad to be back with you all today. Today’s Gospel—from Luke—is one that I have been waiting to explore for a long time. The life of this assisting priest, one foot planted in the Church, the other firmly planted in the very secular world of technology and commerce, has always meant that I seldom get to choose when I get to preach, and also limits the texts on which I might base what I say. I consider myself a full-time resident of both worlds, something that I get asked about both in church and at work rather often. People generally ask how I keep these activities separated; that is, how do I shift gears or put on different hats, so to speak. Turns out, it’s really rather simple. I don’t. I consider them two equal parts of one common life. In exchange for a donation to Second Harvest Food Bank I get a personalized parking spot at work. The name on the placard is “Father Hutchison.” When I come to worship with you I am also that “guy who builds lasers for a living.” I find that my life is actually so full that there is no extra room for anything that might keep the parts of my identity separate.

So now I want to begin to explore today’s gospel. Jesus has just assembled his twelve disciples. But they are not merely to be “disciples”, that is, students, but also empowered by him as ministers, bringing the messages that Jesus will teach them to a world that desperately needs to hear them. And it’s worth noting that Jesus has not chosen from people who are noted for their piety or intellect; these are, very deliberately, ordinary people. They must help to shape and craft Jesus’ messages to fit within a world filled with similarly ordinary people. And, since this involves a certain amount of spirituality, they must be comfortable with that part, too. Therefore they will need to learn to understand things in terms of hope and spirit…and in terms of daily, ordinary, and often bitter life. Today’s gospel gives us a picture of the moment where they are beginning to learn just that.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
    for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
    for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

“But woe to you who are rich,
    for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,
    for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,
    for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”
This is definitely not what one might call part of a prosperity gospel. What’s striking here, something that usually gets left behind in how we understand these words, is that Jesus is addressing the twelve. It is not, as we often like to believe, a message of hope delivered to the crowd gathered near him, but it is a message of stark reality he is giving to his disciples. It is, in a very real sense, the “job description” for any disciple who will carry forward his messages. Jesus sees those who have sought him out, and understands their condition. Everyday life for them is built of poverty, hunger, loss, and being treated as outcasts. Just as John the Baptist did, Jesus understands that these people are looking for something to cling to, something to hope for, and he knows that the religion of the Temple has simply not done it for them. John called the Temple authorities a “brood of vipers” when even they turned to him for baptism. Salvation from the Temple always came at a price, and for the poor and downtrodden who were seeking something better, buying something the Temple called “salvation” didn’t make sense in the long run. The blessings given by the Temple priests didn’t turn into material or physical well-being for the vast majority of those who came to the Temple for help, thinking that their suffering was due to their sinfulness or unworthiness. Their money and goods merely made the leaders of the Temple wealthy at the expense of the resources of those who could scarcely afford them.

So, in order to understand what Jesus is saying, look at it this way. In the Temple the masses must buy their salvation and blessings from those who are wealthy, well-fed, living comfortable lives, and well-respected. His disciples will not set out to be any of those things. Jesus and his disciples will bring a message that hope and salvation that can never be bought, but only shared. “The one who has two cloaks must share with anyone who has none,” said John the Baptist. Similarly, tax collectors, soldiers, and those with power over the lives of others must not become wealthy by cheating, bribery, or extortion. Neither John nor Jesus taught the impoverishment of the wealthy but rather that, in a land where great wealth is possible, the daily desperation of poverty for so many should not the price of that wealth.

The spiritual aspects of Jesus’ message are as important as the social ones. By Jesus’ time, people had been taught for centuries that anyone’s relative well-being or poverty was a measure of their worthiness in God’s eyes. From the time of the Exodus laws and rules were set in place largely as a means of appeasing an angry and vengeful God. The story told in Exodus is of a people repeatedly punished for their sinfulness, and what they all had to do to remove that sinfulness. Now laws that help provide structure for a group are okay; they help produce stability and can provide general benefits for all. But if that group is made to understand that those laws are coming not from their leaders but from an angry God, then it is easy to assume that God is behind any changes in someone’s circumstances, and that this is a reflection of a person’s worth before God. In the religion of the Temple in Jerusalem in Jesus’ time, it was the authority of the Temple that kept the laws, enforced the laws, and had ultimate say over what God deemed worthy and unworthy, righteous and sinful, even acceptable and outcast. It is quite clear from the outset—here in his first instructions to his disciples—that Jesus and his followers are not going down that same road. And similarly, the messages Jesus and the twelve will bring must be just as different. And because of this, from this point on, his fate is essentially sealed.

So what message can you bring to these people that will change their lives, draw them closer to their God, and give them hope? Think about that for a moment. If, as I’ve said, the Temple religion wasn’t helping, what can Jesus offer? And forget the whole “Son of God” thing for now. That would never fit within the framework of the message he’s just delivered. He—and his disciples—will encounter and deal with ordinary people on their own terms, at their own level.
I think that, well, in a nutshell, any message he can bring to these people must be empowering, inclusive, and permanent. In other words, if he’s giving folks the means to become closer to God and live out God’s will without the Temple, then they must come to believe that each soul has a personal tie to a God that loves and cares about them, and that what they each can do is always valued by God. They must therefore feel that they are truly empowered to do God’s will. They must also understand that the same goes for everyone, even those whom Jewish society has labeled “outcast,” since that same loving God does not need to hate, since a loving God’s will for us cannot be built on that. And if God’s mercy or salvation does not need to be renewed or re-purchased at regular intervals, then they must understand that this has always been that way…and always will be that way.

A key piece of all of this is the understanding that God truly loves and cares about each of us. And, according to the Great Commandments, we are to love God with our entire being as well as loving those around us as much as we love our own lives. But let me point out something that has been a large part of my ministry for many years. It comes down to how we understand love. It’s actually a very complex subject, but I think most ways of understanding it can begin in the same way. Let me ask you to think back—maybe way back—to the first time you realized that you had a crush, or the first time you thought you “felt love.” Most of us remember such a time. But just being too young for real, emotionally mature love does not erase its effects on us, even when we are young. When the object of your affection is receptive, in good spirits, happy…you feel on top of the world. But when there is an argument, anger, or rejection…it can plunge you into despair. Here we find a key component of love, more visible in youth because we haven’t developed our self-defenses. It is, simply, that love requires the sharing of one’s own power, one’s life, with another. The power our first loves had over us is sometimes quite memorable. And this doesn’t change with maturity. But this helps us to understand God’s love for us humans, given and received on our terms, based on our lives here on Earth. God’s love for us shares God’s own power with us, but only to be used in how we love one another. That is, in what we share with one another, and how this is meant to benefit everyone. That is the basis of the Great Commandments. That is something we must never forget.

Now Jesus and the twelve have burst upon the scene, and they are making “ordinary” an understanding of God’s love that is meant to become universal. All must be able to detach from God as a source of power and embrace God as a source of love, a model of how we are to treat one another. For that reason Jesus blesses the disciples as they take on the mantles of poverty, hunger, and oppression that the multitudes experience daily. For that reason we are here today to carry on his message…and his work. For that reason Jesus was killed, knowing that love and oppression cannot coexist peacefully.

No matter our station in life, life itself is all we have, in the final analysis. But Jesus calls us today—and every day—to understand that our loving God has given us life…in order that God’s own love will—because of what we do—also have life forever.