

The Sermon No One Wants to Hear (Luke 6:17-26)
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Sixth Sunday after Epiphany (Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; I Corinthians 15:12-20)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-sermon-no-one-wants-to-hear

Luke 6:17-26 (NRSV)

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

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.

(Let's begin with a pop quiz)

There's the sermon on the mount and there's the sermon on the plain. Are they the same or are they different? It's difficult to think Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is not basically the same as Luke's Sermon on the Plain (or vice versa).

But are they?

In Luke's gospel, we have what is sometimes known as, "the lesser sermon." It's similar to the sermon we all know so well as the Sermon on the Mount but it has an edgier, grittier sound to it.

In contrast, Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, has a "smoothed over feel" to it, almost as if it's a stone that's been rubbed smooth from use.

Are they different or are they the same?

In Luke, Jesus descends from the mountaintop where he has been praying down to a level place in order to speak to the people. (Typically in Biblical studies, we don't pay much attention to topography – curious how a place affects what takes place there.)

And when we listen to what he says, we are struck by its clarity and directness. In Luke, Jesus is not polished or poetic, but is instead blunt, radical, and shocking.

In Luke Jesus says, "*Blessed are the poor*" and Matthew softens it by euphemistically adding, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" Where Luke says simply, "*Blessed are the hungry,*" Matthew softens as, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.*"

See the difference? One commentator observed that when we hear Luke's Sermon on the Plain, with all its directness and cutting simplicity, we scurry back to Matthew's gospel because it's been softened for us. Matthew is where all the dirty work of watering down the gospel has been done for us and we can effectively ignore it. Luke's gospel is harder to handle because we have fewer ways to dodge its obvious meaning.

Luke goes on to say,

"blessed are those who weep" and

"blessed are those who are hated because of me."

What kind of blessings are those? To be poor and hungry and crying and ostracized? These are the blessings of God?

But that's only half of it. He goes on to pronounce curses ...

Woe to you who are rich

Woe to you who are full

Woe to you who are laughing

Woe to you when all shall speak well of you.

Wait a minute ... these are the curses? To be rich, to be satisfied, to be laughing, to be well-liked? Which one of us wouldn't think that those are the very things that will make us happy? What in the world is Jesus talking about?

We are not poor ... and more than that, we don't want to be. And while we may not think of ourselves as rich, most of the world does. As one person put it, "if you are able to decide what you will have for dinner, have some method of getting around wherever you want to go whenever you wish, and have a change of clothes or comfortable shoes to wear ... guess what? you're rich!" Our problem is that we are comparing our economic state with the world's elite and thinking we are close to the financial edge when in reality every one of us is rich.

We're certainly not hungry ... most of us have too much to eat. We throw away enough food in America to feed a good part of the hungry world.

How about weeping? Maybe there we might qualify for some sense of blessing. Life is still filled with terrible injustices and there is a sense in which perhaps we can share in some of the world's pain. All our money and all the resources that we have at our fingertips cannot completely shield us from the pain of suffering or loss. It's no small irony that America is ridden with depression and anxiety. But it is also true that our suffering is nothing to compare to the daily reminders of injustice and pain that the poor and the dispossessed feel.

So, what about the fourth blessing? ... to those who are persecuted for Jesus' sake. Let's don't even talk about it since our witness is largely ignored and we are considered irrelevant by the non-Christian world.

Anyone keeping score? At best we might claim 1 out of 4 blessings and if you look on the other side of the ledger, we probably stand in judgment of at least 3 out of 4 woes!

In fact, it's no small irony the woes are some of our most desired qualities. We spend a great portion of our time and livelihood seeking wealth. We earnestly desire to be happy and to laugh and we want everyone to like us. Who wouldn't want these things? And so, we ask again: What was Jesus thinking? What was he talking about?

Fred Craddock helps us understand what's going on here. Unlike the Old Testament blessings and woes found in Deuteronomy, these are not based on performance. they are pronouncements of the way that things either are or someday will be. There is no exhortation to do something in order to receive something in Jesus' sermon.¹

These words are best understood as a window in which we understand that the Kingdom of God is an inverted world. What is up in our limited human understanding is truly down in a spiritual sense. Jesus is pointing us to a new way of seeing the world. He is helping us understand that the Kingdom that God is building needs all of us to make a shift in our thinking and believing. Jesus needs us to understand we live in a different world than what it appears and that we must learn to live in that new reality.

¹ Craddock, Fred, *Preaching Through the Christian Year C*, Trinity Press Intl., Valley Forge, 1994, 102-3

Jesus is announcing the symmetry of the 4 blessings and the 4 woes are the announcement that the reign of God is coming to change things and to make them right for everyone. They are the pronouncements the gospel, with all its power to heal and to comfort, is offered freely to all who respond to its announcement.

Luke tells us when Jesus came down off the mountain where he was praying, he came down to where all the people were and he stood with them on level ground. This is another way of Luke emphasizing what Jesus has already so eloquently said, that his ministry was intended for all those who are poor, for the captives, for the blind and for all those who are oppressed. It's a gospel that Jesus said was meant for everyone, not just for the privileged and the rich and the powerful.

I can almost hear you thinking, "I get it ... this is the way it will be someday when the end of time comes ... this is about the kingdom of the pie in the sky."

So, is this message Jesus' way of describing some moment in the future? Luke would say "Yes" and "No." In this sermon, Luke helps us hear that Jesus is saying that the present and the future are somehow joined together in some mysterious way. The eschatological reality of someday is already beginning with the advent of Jesus. Jesus has already announced as much: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" And the "today" that Jesus announced continues through to the present moment. In fact, it has always been the work of the church to make the future sense of "today" a reality in this present moment. The prophecy of Isaiah concerning the poor, the imprisoned, the diseased and the oppressed is no longer just a hope, it is the agenda for all the followers of Jesus.²

It's something worth thinking about as we think about what it means for us to walk out of this moment of worship and back out into the world of need. Are we willing to think with Jesus about the world that is coming but is not fully here and are we willing to be God's partners to make it so? By faith, can you see it? And if you can see it, will you commit yourself to making it so?

Amen.

² Fred Craddock, *Interpretation*, 87-89