



“Blessed Are...”

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Luke 6:17-26

American film producer Robert Evans—who is best known for movies like *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Godfather*, and *Chinatown*—once said, “There are three sides to every story: your side, my side, and the truth. And no one is lying. Memories shared serve each differently.” Did you catch what he was saying? There are always multiple sides to every story. And although they are different, they are all true. No one is lying.

We see this tension between multiple sides of the same story quite often throughout the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in particular, share many of the same stories—often told from slightly different perspectives, and today’s scripture reading serves as a great example. This passage from Luke 6 is a speech given by Jesus that we commonly refer to as “The Sermon on the Plain.” It closely resembles another speech given by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, which many of us know better as “The Sermon on the Mount.” But while the sermons in both Gospels are similar, the two accounts of the words spoken by Jesus are markedly different.

The author of Matthew depicts the story this way: A crowd gathers to see Jesus. Seeing this, he escapes them by going up a mountain. His disciples follow Jesus and join him as he begins to teach them the lesson that follows. Notice who is in the audience in this telling of the story. Only the elite group known as the disciples get to hear the words of Jesus. This message is not intended to be overheard by the common folk who have gathered to meet Jesus. In fact, Jesus has intentionally left the crowd behind. And why does he go up a mountain? What is the significance of the mountain?

In our modern-day understanding, we view the physical and spiritual worlds as interconnected and integrated. Everything physical has within it a spirit—spirit is at the core of everything created. The spiritual world is within us and all around us. But the ancient worldview of the Bible sees these two worlds in a much more hierarchical way. The physical world—the earthly world—is down below, while the spiritual world—the heavenly world—is up above. The higher you climb—up a mountain, for example—the closer you are to God, to heaven, to the spiritual world. Where does Moses receive the Ten Commandments from God? On a mountain! Where does Jesus appoint the 12 disciples in Mark and Luke? On a mountain! And after his death and resurrection, where does Jesus appear to his apostles in order to commission them to “Go and make disciples of all the nations”? (That’s right)... On a mountain! Although we, as modern-day readers, may not necessarily believe that God is located in the sky or in outer space—remnants of this ancient worldview still permeate our modern-day language about God. It isn’t hard for us to recognize that the mountain symbolizes the spiritual world—a place to which one can escape the crowds of people and earthly distractions; to be in a place of quiet solitude and be closer to God.

The author of Luke paints a different picture for us in today's scripture. In the verses just before our reading from this morning, we learn that Jesus has spent the night on the mountain praying to God. The following morning, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, which he named his apostles. Together, they climb down from the mountain to the plain, the level place at the foot of the mountain, to be among the crowds of people that are gathering to hear from Jesus. Notice that in this telling of the story, the author distinguishes between the twelve apostles of Jesus and a larger group of followers called disciples. When Jesus speaks in this version of the story, he speaks to everyone—the apostles, the great crowd of his disciples, and the great multitude that had gathered from Galilee and the surrounding areas.

Are you familiar with the term “down-to-earth”? I think this term works on multiple levels to describe Jesus in today's scripture reading. Not only is he coming down from the mountain to reside firmly in the earthly world, but he is speaking to the multitude of people that have gathered—the working class of his time. He is demonstrating his humility and, as we will see in a moment, speaking to the needs of his audience in a way that is genuine, practical, and realistic.

Already we pick up some hints from the way both of these authors set the stage for Jesus to speak. The Sermon on the Mount from Matthew is for the ears of an exclusive audience of Jesus's closest followers. The author foreshadows a message focusing on the spiritual realm. Meanwhile, the Sermon on the Plain from today's reading in Luke has a much different audience—it is inclusive of apostles, disciples, and a great multitude of people from the region. He is speaking to people from Jerusalem and from the towns of Tyre and Sidon—the naming of these places is significant. It tells us that this crowd included Jews and Gentiles; they came from urban and rural communities; they were poor peasants and fisherman, exploited by the ruling classes, struggling every day to scrape by—we know this because scholars tell us that this was the experience of roughly 80% of the region's population. As much as 80% of the population of this region worked to enrich the lives of the ruling elite, while at the same time struggling to meet their own needs. The author of Luke foreshadows a sermon that addresses the concerns of the people, of a physical reality, of their earthly concerns in the here-and-now.

And the Beatitudes, or blessings, that follow highlight this. Take a listen and see if you can spot the difference.

From Matthew: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven.” And from Luke: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kin-dom of God. Do you hear the difference? “Poor in spirit” is not the same as “poor.” In Matthew's version, Jesus speaks about a spiritual reality, and he is speaking about people—other people. “The poor in spirit”—they will inherit the kin-dom of heaven. In Luke, Jesus is talking directly to the people gathered—“blessed are you who are poor...yours is the kin-dom of God.”

See if you can hear the differences in these passages: In Matthew: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” And in Luke: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” From Matthew: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” And from Luke: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” Notice how both versions point to a view of God's kin-dom that is different, that is better. But the version in Luke is unique. It conveys a vision of a new world which requires us to engage in new

behaviors. It promises a reversal of fortunes to the listeners in the crowd who are being oppressed and exploited right now—and not spiritually, but physically. You who are poor, hungry, and weeping at this very moment, Jesus declares that God’s dream for all of you is to live out this hope of a better life. You will experience it first-hand!

As I was preparing my sermon this past week, I noticed that every time I typed in the word “Beatitudes” in my web browser or at the library, the overwhelming majority of the search results dealt with the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew. When I asked people about the Beatitudes, most were able to tell me about the spiritual blessings from Matthew, but almost nobody was familiar with the physical blessings from Luke. I wondered for some time why Jesus’s sermon from Matthew is so much better known than the one from Luke. Both scriptures appear in our lectionary, so why is one more popular than the other?

I have a theory that answers this question. In order to explain it, I will make a difficult confession to you. When I get in my car after worship is over and drive west on Royal Lane to get home, I will most likely be forced to stop at a traffic light before taking a left turn onto I-35. While the light is red, there will be someone walking on the median next to the turning lane holding a sign asking for money. And while he or she makes their way past my window, I might give a quick glance and forced smile, because I don’t want to be rude. But I will feel guilty for not having spare change in my pocket to give to them, or a gift-card, or even some food or a bottle of water. So I will avoid making eye contact for too long, and I will sit there in my discomfort until the light turns green again. Maybe you have had a similar experience. There is something about poverty, hunger, and homelessness that makes us uncomfortable. It is easier for us to speak about spiritual poverty than it is to confront the reality of physical poverty.

And, as if the blessings in the sermon on the plain aren’t enough to make us uncomfortable, Jesus gives us the woes. The word “woe” is used here as an exclamation of grief, or pity, or concern. Jesus uses this word to convey that he is deeply troubled by certain behaviors. Not only is Jesus saying, “blessed are you who are poor,” but then he says, “woe to you who are rich.” Not only, “blessed are you who are hungry now,” but also “woe to you who are full now.” Not only “blessed are you who weep now,” but also “woe to you who are laughing now.” How are we to feel about ourselves if we are rich, or if we have enough to eat, or if we are happy? Is Jesus trying to make us feel guilty?

I don’t think that is what Jesus is saying here at all. I think what Jesus is doing here is to highlight something very important. The blessings and woes of Jesus are two sides of the same coin. Jesus recognizes that there are two groups of people in society—the “haves” and the “have nots.” And having enough money, enough food, and enough resources to live a worry-free life means having privilege and power that others do not have. Being blessed with enough resources to live a comfortable life is not in and of itself a bad thing. But woe to you who have resources and do not use your power and privilege to help your neighbors who lack those same resources. Woe to you who are rich and do not use your power and privilege to lift the poor out of their poverty. Woe to you who have enough to eat and do not use your power and privilege to put an end to hunger. Woe to you who are happy now and do not use your power and privilege to end oppression, exploitation, and human suffering. I am concerned for you who do not do these things. I am troubled by your behavior, says Jesus.

This text is uncomfortable for us, and it should be uncomfortable. This passage offers a lens for us through which we can evaluate how we are blessed, and how we ought to use our power and privilege to uplift those who have neither. The exploitation of the working-class troubles Jesus enough to call out woe. He uses his power and privilege to speak out against an economic system that oppressed them. He speaks truth to power, pointing out the unfair distribution of power and wealth and how it leads to exploitation. He concerns himself with the concerns of the polis—the community. And that is what he is asking us to do as well.

In the blessings and the woes of Luke 6, Jesus gives us a formula to use in our pursuit of justice. It reminds us that we cannot stay silent in the face of oppression, exploitation, and injustice. It reminds us to face our discomfort and to use our power and privilege to be the voice of the voiceless. We ask ourselves, “who are the people in our communities that Jesus would have blessed?” Who are those people in our churches, in our schools, in our neighborhoods?” Would he say, “blessed are you who are children separated from your parents at the border and detained for seeking asylum?” Would Jesus say, “blessed are you who are dying because you can’t afford your life-saving medication?” Would he say, “blessed are you who are denied housing because of the color of your skin?” Each of us must decide for ourselves how to complete this phrase “blessed are you who...” And at the same time, we must acknowledge that those who are discomfited are also blessed, for we are called to comfort others.

I would like to close this morning with a benediction that reminds us to do just that. I was first introduced to this Franciscan Benediction by Aubin Petersen, sister of long-time member Sharon Vickrey. For years, Aubin and her husband Mark have hosted a monthly meeting in their home called “Another Story.” It is an opportunity for voices from the LGBTQ+ community, which are often silenced in our churches, to share their experiences and their stories. Through the ministry of “Another Story,” Aubin and Mark use their power and privilege to amplify the voices of those our churches have traditionally silenced—and I believe that is a fulfillment of what Jesus calls us to do in the Sermon on the Plain.

At the end of each meeting, Aubin asks one volunteer to read these words of benediction as a reminder of our purpose:

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.