

## “Blessings and Woes”

Luke 6: 17-26

It is amazing to me how God always gives us the word we need to hear in a particular time and in a particular place. Notice I did not say Want to hear. I said that God gives us the word we need to hear.

Let me explain: I chose this text a while ago, not knowing what would be happening in our country and in our state right now: people feeling frustration and anger, tensions rising, emotions boiling over and dividing us even more.

I realized as I began to work on this sermon that I was supposed to talk about the Beatitudes in the midst of all this turmoil. My first thought was, “Awww man, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

Well, that was Wednesday. As the week progressed, I was still waiting for the Spirit of God to give me a word to share with everyone this morning.

I have to tell you by the end of the week, I was getting a little worried. At one point, I even joked with Mary Weese, the Presbyterian minister in town, to please share with me her sermon this week because I had nothing. Don’t worry, she didn’t. So if anyone is to blame for this sermon, it’s yours truly.

Okay, where was I? That was Wednesday and Thursday. By Friday, I had taken to pleading with God, asking, begging for a different Scripture to share but the Spirit of God said, No. This is the Word that I want you to bring for the people of God for a time such as this.

So I went back and spent a little bit more time with Luke's version of the Beatitudes. Luke's version of this text is not the one we are most familiar with when it comes to the Beatitudes. That's Matthew's version. Matthew is the one who says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the peacemakers."

We tend to like Matthew's version better than Luke's because well, because Matthew frames the conversation in spiritual terms. He shapes the blessings into a spiritual framework and within that spiritual framework, we can and do find our place as people of faith.

Because at some point or another, we have all been poor in spirit. Because at some point or another, we have mourned. We all like to think of ourselves as ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, as ones who see themselves as peacemakers. In reading Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, we tend to find our place and kind of like the idea that we are called to rejoice and be glad, knowing that the Kingdom of God is ours.

But Luke's version, well, Luke's version of the Beatitudes, we would rather pretend didn't exist. Because let's be honest, we struggle to find our place anywhere in those blessings.

Sure we talk about being poor. We talk about being hungry. We talk about being filled with sorrow. But deep down, we know Luke's version of these blessings is not for us. They are for the truly poor. They are for the truly hungry. They are for the ones who truly weep because they have nothing. They are for the ones who have been forgotten. They are for the ones who have been pushed to the margins and are ignored. Luke's version of the Beatitudes is for the ones we as a society would rather pretend didn't exist.

No Luke's version of these blessings are not for us who although we may have some tight spots until month's end, we still have money in the bank. We can still look at our pantries full of food, and complain that there is nothing to eat. We know that no matter what, we have a safety net of resources to catch us if we fall.

No, Luke's version of these blessings is not for us. But you know what is...his list of woes. You know the list of woes which follows his blessings, that list of woes which Matthew avoids putting into his version. Luke makes us even more uncomfortable with his version of the Beatitudes by adding a list of woes

which describes us perfectly...Woe to you who are rich...Woe to you who are full now...Woe to you who are laughing now.

These describe us. These woes describes the majority of our community. These woes describes the majority of our nation. In reading Luke's version of the beatitudes, as hard as it is to admit, we know, we know that we will not find our place among the blessings Luke describes but rather we can definitely and easily find our place among the list of woes, a list of woes which only Luke is brave enough to add.

I have to tell you...this is when I had another conversation with God, asking, pleading again for another Scripture, another word to bring today and again, the response I heard was...this is my Word for my people for a time such as this.

So if we can't ignore Luke's list of blessings and woes, what are we as people of faith supposed to do with it?

To answer that question, we need to remember the context when looking at this text. Luke's version of the Beatitudes falls within Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Now this is significant because when Matthew tells his version of the Beatitudes, they fall during Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is teaching and preaching high above the people, talking down to the people, handing

the word down from on high, symbolizing Moses bringing the 10 commandments down off the mountain for the people.

But in Luke, Jesus is looking up at his disciples. Jesus is on the same level as the people. Not separated. Not divided. Not set apart from but rather, Jesus was in and among the people.

This is important because this is Luke's way of telling us, reminding us that Jesus came to level the playing field for all of God's children. Not pick favorites. Not break bread only with the powerful and mighty. Jesus came to level the playing field for all of God's children but especially for the poor, the forgotten, the marginalized.

You see, from the very beginning, Luke has been telling us this. We have just refused to listen. In the very first chapter of his Gospel, Luke has a young woman lift her voice in song, telling us that the rich will be made poor, the poor will be made rich, the weak will be strong and the strong made weak. In the very next chapter, Luke tells us that the birth announcement of the Son of God didn't come to a King. It is made to some poor shepherds on the hillside, some of the dirtiest, lowest, and most marginalized people at that time.

Then since we don't seem to be catching on, Luke tells us that Jesus' first sermon at the Temple came from the scroll of Isaiah, the very prophet which tells

us God is about to create something new. So here, in Jesus' first sermon, he reads a portion from Isaiah which says "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus tells us time and time again that he didn't come to make us comfortable and happy. He came to set people free from the darkness which binds them. So if we are paying attention to Luke's version of the Gospel at all, we would know that from the very beginning, he has been telling us that the Kingdom of God is like nothing we have ever experienced before. It defies our expectations. It flips our world upside down. It comes to us in surprising and amazing new ways. From the beginning of his Gospel, Luke has been telling us that the purpose and vision of the Kingdom of God is to throw everything off balance.

Which is why when Jesus puts forth the Beatitudes, statements which reframe the Kingdom conversation once again, he reframes them not in the easy to embrace spiritual realm. Rather Jesus reframes the conversation of the Kingdom of God in the difficult, messy realm of the socio-economic realities which many people faced and continue to still face today. By reframing the conversation this way, Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of God cannot be something it is not...It has and will always be an invitation to see things differently, to see things not as

the world sees them but rather to see things through the eyes of compassion and love. By reframing the Kingdom conversation in such a way, we soon discover that the invitation has now become an opportunity...an opportunity to be surrounded by the unexpected, life transforming blessings of God's love and God's grace...an opportunity which is available for all of God's children, not only for a select few. By reframing the Kingdom conversation in such a way, Jesus invites us to open our eyes and see that God still at work in our world.

As I have lived with this text this past week, it has opened my eyes to our present day reality in ways I never really expected and in doing so, made me realize that I have a confession to make. This week has been hard for me. It has been dark and confusing. I have tried to practice what I preach and have tried to find God in the process. And yes, I'll admit that there have been moments when I wasn't even sure I would be able to do just that.

However, after living with this text this past week, I have also come to realize that this week is not and has never been about the larger community. It is and has always been about me, about us... coming face to face with all the times we missed the mark of becoming the people God created and calls us to be.

This week, I realized that I take the Gospel message for granted. I make it easy while ignoring the challenges it presents. I separate and disconnect myself

from the community around me, living in an ivory tower, a bubble if you will, pretending the Gospel message is easy when in reality it is difficult to live out. The Gospel message is messy and complicated. It cannot be something it is not, a prettied up version of my own expectations and ideas of how I would run the world.

The Gospel Message for us as disciples of Christ has been and continues to be an invitation. It is a call for us as Jesus' followers to practice what we preach and level the playing field for all of God's children. We are called to continue Jesus' work for justice, not only for a select few but for all of God's children. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be a presence of love and grace, not only for the people who think like us or act like us but for all of God's children. As ones who claim as our Lord, the one who brought forth new life, who overcame the darkness and despair, if we claim the Risen Savior as our Lord, then we should always always remember that the Kingdom of God comes to us in surprising and unexpected ways, often challenging us to step out of our comfort zones and to enter into the margins with the poor, the hungry and the weeping.

And as uncomfortable as it makes me, I'm glad that I found my place among Luke's list of woes...because now, now I am reminded that I should never be okay with a world where people go hungry each and every night when there is plenty to eat. Now I am reminded that I should never be okay with a world where people

live on less than a dollar a day when there is more than enough resources to go around. In finding my place in and among the list of woes, I am reminded that I should never be okay with a world where people weep day in and day out because violence, hate, uncertainty, fear and worry has become their daily bread.

This week has been a wake up call for me, for us as people of faith...for a time such as this.

Because now more than ever, we are called to have the courage and the strength to always remember that we cannot force the Gospel Message to be something it is not. Because now more than ever, we are to see things differently, to see them not as how the world sees things but to see things, to see people through the eyes of God's compassion and love. Because now more than ever, we are called to never take the Gospel message for granted ever again. May it be so. Amen.