

“Happy Are You...”

Luke 6: 20-31

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 these texts months ago, not knowing what would be happening in our country right now: people feeling frustration and anger, hate and fear while others celebrate and rejoice. All these emotions are boiling over and dividing our country 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 that. 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 we talk about 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 these blessings into a spiritual framework and in that framework, we can 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 wasn't there. 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 ignored. They are 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, still have money in the bank, who look at our pantries full of food, and complain that there is nothing to eat, who 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 are not for us. But you know what is...his list of woes. You know the list of woes that follows his blessings, that list of woes that Matthew avoids putting into his version. Luke makes us even more uncomfortable with his version of the Beatitudes by adding a list of woes that

perfectly describe us...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 describe half of our community. These woes describe half of our nation. In reading Luke's version of the beatitudes, as hard as it is to admit, we know, we know that we are not be able to find our place among the blessings Luke describes but we can definitely and easily find our place among the list of woes, a list of woes that 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 have 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. Jesus is teaching and preaching high above the people, talking down to the people, handing the word down from on high.

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.

Now why is this 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 announcement of the birth 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. Poor shepherds were the first to hear the good news of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

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 that told us God is about to create something new. So here, in Jesus' first sermon, he reads a

portion from Isaiah that 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,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Jesus tells us that he didn’t come to make us comfortable and happy. He came to set people free from the darkness that binds them.

Then if that wasn’t enough of a clue, Luke follows up this proclamation with Jesus choosing his disciples. But instead of picking rich officers or powerful kings, Jesus chooses a motley crew for his disciples...fisherman and tax collectors, zealots and doubters.

If we are paying attention to Luke’s version of the Gospel, 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. And yet somehow still we refused to listen. After all that Luke has been telling us about the purpose and vision of the Kingdom of God, we are still trying to force it to be something it is not. We are trying to make it into our own image, into our own understanding of what is acceptable and what is not.

In the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus puts forth the Beatitudes, statements that reframe the Kingdom conversation once again, reframe them not in the easy to embrace spiritual realm but in the difficult, messy realm of the socio-economic realities that many people faced and continue to still face today, by reframing the conversation, Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of God cannot be something it is not...It has always been 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. Then by doing so, we discover that this is where we truly want to be a place surrounded by the unexpected, life transforming blessings of God's love and God's grace...a place that is available for all of God's children, not only for a select few, a place that opens our eyes to 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 in 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.

But I'll be honest, there have been moments when I wasn't even sure I would be able to do just that.

But that was on Wednesday. After living with this text this past week, I have come to realize that this week is not and has never been about the division our country is facing right now. It is and has always been about me...me coming face to face with my sin, a word you don't hear me say very often, but yes my sin of complacency concerning the Gospel message.

The Gospel message that calls me to love my enemies, the Gospel message that calls me to do good and expect nothing in return. The Gospel message that tells me to do unto others as I would have them to do unto me.

This week, I have come to realize that I took this Gospel message for granted. It was easy and is easy to say. It is easy to live out this feel good message when you assume everyone thinks like you do, acts like you do. But after seeing all the hate and vitriol that has been filling social media this past week, I have come to realize that there are people who don't think like me, people who don't act like me, people that I have ignored or pretended didn't exist.

I'll be honest, this week has been a wake up call for me...not because of the election or its results. Please don't hear me say that.

It has been a wake up call for me because I have come to realize that for too many times like Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, I have given my words of faith on top of a mountain, separated and disconnected from the community around

me. I have been in an ivory tower, a bubble if you will, pretending the Gospel message is easy when in reality it is difficult to live out. It is messy and complicated and 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.

This week has been a wake up call for me 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 have become their daily bread.

This week has been a wake up call for me...for a time such as this.

So today and all days May we have the courage and the strength to always remember that we cannot force the Gospel Message to be something it is not. It will always be an invitation that flips our world upside down and calls us 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. And May we always remember to be merciful as our God is merciful, and to always always love our enemies. May we always remember to do good, and expect nothing in return. And may we always remember to never take the Gospel message for granted ever again.

Amen.