

Text: Luke 6: 17-26
Title: Plain Talk
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At the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee there's a lovely green hill that rises up from the shore. The hill is wide, the slope is gentle, and the middle is kind of concave, forming a natural amphitheater. As the traditional location for the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus would have stood on that hill and spoke to those gathered, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..."

Today the ruins of a 4th century monastery can be seen at the bottom of the hill and the top features a chapel built and maintained by the Franciscans. Today the hill is covered with flowering bushes, manicured lawns, and quiet places to read and reflect on the words of Jesus – if you're not distracted by people taking selfies or the giant parking lot lined with buses.

There's no such place of remembrance for the "Sermon on the Plain."
There's no chapel, garden, or tour guide.
There's no souvenir shop or respite for spiritual pilgrims.

In Luke's gospel Jesus prays at night on a mountainside. In the morning he gathers his disciples, chooses 12 as apostles, and then descending the mountain stops at a level place and delivers a sermon. In the Gospel of Matthew, he goes up the mountain to preach....

Now. I guess it could be the same place.

Some think that Matthew sets Jesus' sermon on a mountain to harken back to Moses receiving the Law on a mountain and that Luke places it on a plain to remind us that Jesus was one of us – human and accessible. The sermons are similar, so maybe the setting is less historical and more theological? And, quite frankly, the hill is flat and wide. One person's mountain is another person's plain. Could be the same place? I say tomato; you say tomato....

Who knows?

I'm struck by Luke's set up.

Luke emphasizes the size of the crowd and uses geographic markers that point to its cultural and ethnic breadth. These are not just followers from the Galilean hills, but from far and wide these are the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. And Luke notes that they are trying to touch Jesus "because power was coming from him and healing them all."

Roseland Christian Ministries has started a substantial building renovation. As part of spreading that news and seeking donations, they did a little video that opens with David Walker singing, "Walk with me, Lord. Walk with me. While I'm on this tedious journey, I want Jesus to walk with me...."

Then as he walks down the street he's joined by Betty Johnson, and Bey Bey, and Ms. Watts, and Ulysses, etc. etc. A crowd of grandmothers and children, old folks and young men gradually join in this old gospel song as they walk toward the Center. "I want Jesus to walk with me..." It's beautiful. It's powerful. It packs a wallop.

That wallop is punctuated when you know their stories. There are recovering drug addicts and hookers. Most have family members who've been shot. There's a gay guy who was beaten and drug behind a car to within an inch of his life. Many have mental health issues. There are refugees, ex-cons, homeless kids, the blind and the lame, the unemployed and the grieving....

And to them Jesus says,

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh....*

There's a chapel commemorating the Sermon on the Mount because the language is sublime, "Blessed are the poor in the spirit... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."

But the Sermon on the Plain is jagged and jarring. The ground is dusty, the stink of desperation hangs in the air, and the crowd is the last, the least, and the left behind. There's no chapel for them. There are no cross-stitch pillows quoting Jesus. There's something profoundly human, earthy, and broken. "I want Jesus to walk to with me..."

Jesus speaks statements of blessing and woe.

In our context "blessed" has a churchy-feel that means fortunate or favored by God. In the New Testament it's a slippery word to translate but it's use in our text is familiar. Jesus is using a proverbial framework – a two-part affirmation that offered a common wisdom.

Blessed are those who floss for their gums will be healthy and their teeth will be happy.
Blessed are those who use sun screen for their skin shall remain supple and smooth.
Blessed are those who arrive early for they have their choice of seats. You get the idea....

Jesus takes that familiar framework and turns it on its head:

*Blessed are the poor....
Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and insult you...*

That would have pulled the listeners up by the short hairs.

That isn't how things are supposed to work.

And, then Jesus doubles-down by adding statements of "woe."

Again, the "woes" are not in the Sermon on the Mount. And again, "woe" is sort of hard to translate. Woe does not mean "unhappy" or "cursed" or "damned," but chances are that "it was more of an attention-getter or emotion-setter." One scholar likened it to "yikes!"

The point being that Jesus takes the conventional wisdom of the world and flips it over. The things we think are advantages are actually illusory. And, it's worth noting that these "beatitudes" are not directions or instructions or advice. They're not telling us what to do. From Jesus' perspective, they're telling us the way things are.

Barbara Brown Taylor offers this take:

Since we are so used to hearing them by now it is hard for us to get a sense of their original shock value. Perhaps if I said, "Blessed are you who suffer from cancer, for you shall be made whole," or "Blessed are you whose prayers are not answered, for you shall see God face to face." Perhaps if I said, "Woe to you who drive new cars, for you shall walk on foot," or "Woe to you with college degrees, for you have received your reward."

Now. That's crazy talk!

That's not mountain talk, or plain talk, that's crazy talk!

There's nothing blessed about being poor, hungry, or hated.

There's nothing blessed about being a refugee on the run.

There's nothing blessed about having cancer or being abused or living on the margins.

And woe to you with privilege? That's a bridge too far.

We earned what we have. We worked hard. Nobody handed me anything.....

Dear friends, what are we to make of these opening refrains from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain? Let me offer a couple observations.

The blessings and woes of Jesus are not meant as observational proverbs about life. They're "performative." That is to say that the words have power and perform or make true what they represent. These are statements about what it is true today and what will be true when the Kingdom comes in fullness. As Jesus says them, they are an eschatological reality. They're of one piece with Jesus' first public statement in his hometown synagogue...

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..... Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

The words are performative. Even in the hope of a great reversal they are also fulfilled today. Barbara Brown Taylor thinks of them as something akin to a Ferris Wheel. Listen to her description:

Jesus does not tell anyone to do anything. Instead, he describes different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. The Ferris Wheel will go around, so that those who are swaying at the top,

with the wind in their hair and all the world's lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down right now, where all they can see are candy wrappers in the sawdust, will have their chance to touch the stars. It is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone on that wheel.

And that is to say that on a plain in Galilee, or a street in Roseland, or in a sanctuary in Oak Forest this world will be turned upside down. A kingdom is come and coming. Jesus is describing the reality of that kingdom and he is prescribing what is to come.

There's a forward lean to our text. These blessings and woes reach toward a future that is yet to be realized. They peer over the ridge to the dawning of a new day. And over the ridge there is a great reversal.

That reversal is a recurring theme in Luke. Things will get turned over, flipped around, turned on their head. From the Song of Mary, to the inaugural sermon of Jesus, to the way that Luke frames the crucifixion there's a-change-a-comin'.

The hungry will be fed.
The thirsty will be satisfied.
The lonely will be surrounded by family.
Those weeping will have their tears wiped away.
The dead will be resurrected.

That may seem like pie-in-the-sky, but our calling is to live by the vision and values of that great reversal. Our calling is to see and love one another in that light. The human plight is hard and brutal, but it's not the full story.

To those who are healthy and well fed,
to those who are eating in a soup kitchen,
to those hiding secrets,
to those who think their good fortune is a sign of God's favor,
to those weary, dirty and distressed,
to those battling demons,
Jesus says the Kingdom is come and coming.

We're all in this together; a communion of saints.

All on the same plain.
All on the same wheel.
All belonging to one another.
All belonging to God in Christ.
And the Sermon on the Plain is glimpse of that reality.
May we be receptive and responsive to that vision.

Amen.