

Blessed are You
A sermon for the Epiphany 6C
Luke 6:17-26

Putting this morning's scripture in context, we find ourselves still very early in Jesus' ministry. He has been traveling from town to town sharing the Good News, healing body, mind, and spirit, attracting disciples and followers who are seeking a cure for their brokenness as they seek healing from this amazing Rabbi.

The beatitudes that Jesus gives to us...the "blessings" or the "blessed are's" are found in both the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Both are part of very important sermons given by Jesus very early in His ministry...but there are some significant differences.

In Matthew, the sermon where the Beatitudes are found was given from a mountainside and is referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. The Lukan sermon is given on a level place and is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain.

In Matthew, there are 8 beatitudes. In Luke, there are 4 and they are coupled with 4 woes. So one has to wonder, is there a conflict here or what is going on for here we have 2 differing accounts of a sermon that is very important in our understanding of the message that Christ was bringing to us.

It is well established by the writers themselves that Matthew and Luke were not present at these events. They came from an oral tradition that came down from the disciples and were both put to paper within 30 years or so of Jesus' crucifixion. Both Gospels were written to entirely different audiences. Matthew was written to the Jewish Christians and contains plenty of references that these followers of Christ would have known and understood. Luke's Gospel was written for the gentile followers of Christ.

Many scholars tend to believe that these are 2 entirely different sermons on similar key points that are delivered to 2 entirely separate audiences. Let's take a look at the differences. Here is the text from Matthew:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in

heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

In Luke, we hear this:

“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.

Matthew speaks of the poor *in spirit*...Luke speaks of the poor.

Matthew speaks of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...Luke simply speaks of those who are hungry *now*, who weep *now*.

Matthew offers condemnation to no one, yet Luke gives us the four woes. I like the way that Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message* when he says:

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get.

And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long.

And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games.

There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

"There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! *Your task is to be true, not popular.*

By now, you're probably saying, "That's nice preacher, but what does it mean for me?"

What I think Jesus was saying, especially to those of us living right here and right now is this: The important things in life have absolutely nothing to do with how much money you have or how much power you wield. For when we become fat with these things of the flesh, we become lazy in the things of the spirit.

When we become put our trust in “stuff”, we tend to ignore the things that are eternal.

Jesus isn't calling us to be poor. But Jesus is pointing out that when we think we have it all, we tend to rely upon ourselves, we tend to ignore our God who is the source of all that we have.

We tend to have a skewed sense of what being truly blessed really means. We tend to think that those who have continued health, wealth and prosperity are the truly blessed.

In fact, this view of blessings is nearly as old as time and religion itself. A quick survey of the Old Testament shows us that Israel thought of blessings much the same way as we do today. They told the story of Abraham and Sarah in such a way as to show God's favor upon Abraham through his wealth, some of it at the expense of foreign kings. Israel's national blessings were thought to be at a peak during the prosperous reign of David, when their territory was at it largest. They knew blessings when they saw them, and so do we.

A quick look at Jesus list of blessings and woes tells us that something is out of place. The poor, the hungry, the weeping and the hated do not top most people's lists of the “blessed” folks that they know. Even if those folks are promised rewards later, we still wouldn't consider them terribly blessed. And the rich, the full, the

laughing, and the well spoken of are not usually thought of as particularly cursed or afflicted. In fact, to echo the words of Tevye, talking to Perchik, the communist revolutionary soon-to-be son-in-law from Fiddler on the Roof, “If it is a curse to be wealthy, may I be so cursed!”

It is not enough to explain these things away as trouble now for some future reward. This kind of thinking gets a well deserved critique at the hands of Marx and Engels who called such religion “the opiate of the masses.” And we don’t do any justice to the radical nature of Jesus teaching either, if we simply commend the usual blessings as such, just deferred. First of all, Jesus defers only half of the blessings and curses, the first and the last are connected to the here and now. Mind you, I don’t think Jesus was some kind of radical communist reformer, nor do I intend to be. I do think that Jesus was warning the people of his day, as the prophets did before him, of the danger of associating God’s blessings with the fleeting comforts of life.

So just what is Jesus saying? I think that we need to be careful how we answer this question. But we need to find an answer, no matter how incomplete or unfulfilling that answer might be.

Here, it is important to note a couple of things. First of all, Jesus is using both present and future language in both the blessings and the curses of this passage, giving us a sense that there are things that will be part of and will be rejected by the “already present/not yet fulfilled” messianic reign that Jesus very presence initiates. Second, we have already seen that Jesus himself stands under both the blessings and the curses of this passage. People have already both “spoken well of him” and reviled him. He will walk a path that leads both to the “hosannas” of a triumphant entry into Jerusalem as well as the shouts to “crucify him” before Pilate.

It may well be the fact that he calls for restraint on the part of those singing his praises as well as his rejection of their aspirations for him and his movement that give us a clue how we are to read what Jesus is saying in these strange beatitudes. Jesus, time after time, insists that whatever is happening is not about him. It isn't about his own enrichment, it is about his journey to the cross. By Chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel we find Jesus turning his face toward Jerusalem, warning the disciples in no uncertain terms that he intends to go to the cross.

In fact, it is about God accomplishing the restoration of humanity, of all creation really. The understanding that God does

this not through acts of might, or power and wealth, but through the scandal of a cross, must be our guide as we approach these beatitudes. The blessings and curses serve as a reminder that the new covenant of God foretold by Jeremiah and sealed by the cross has a new set of blessings and curses to guide those who live in this covenant.

What happens when we ask for God's blessings in song and prayer? What happens when we think of God's blessings only in terms of our own personal well being or material success?

In light of what Jesus says in Luke 6, I am led to understand that this is a dangerous thing. What if we were truly blessed in the way that Jesus says. Would that mean that our blessings would lead us to poverty, hunger, grief and hatred? The surprising answer is, yes, if we are following the way of the cross. For those are the very things Jesus endured, and we are called to follow that very way.

For here this thing that Luke Bouman calls "the paradox of grace" comes full circle: our giving God gives away all outward blessings and power and might for us, and takes on our poverty, pain, hunger, grief, even death itself. Our giving God has always found that giving life is more meaningful than holding onto life, and even in the face of death, his giving did not waver. In a few short weeks we will be asked to take the journey to the cross with

Jesus, and finally, when we arrive, we will discover that all of the comforts of life, all of the so-called blessings of life mean absolutely nothing in the shadow of the cross.

And here's the rub, if we try to hang on to those things as blessings in light of the cross, we may even be allowed to keep them, but they finally do not satisfy us, and we feel impoverished and empty despite the abundance all around us. The blessings we crave are dangerous because they tempt us away from the God who gives them. God, in Christ, did not choose the blessings of wealth and power for himself, but rather chose the deeper blessings of the things that will make the restoration project finally come to all creation, even though, for a time, it will trigger want and even rejection. It is through that rejection, giving himself willingly for the sake of others, even when they reject him, that God finally defeats even death itself.

Now he calls us to give up our fear of those things, and the insanity that self preservation brings. In covenant with God we are promised true bliss, true blessings, true joy. I wonder if we have this clearly in mind when we pray for God to bless us and our families? I wonder if that's what we are thinking when we sing "God Bless America." My instinct tells me that it isn't, but my hunch tells me that it should be. We invest so much of ourselves in being the strongest, the best, the most prosperous people the world

has ever known. Perhaps, when we are truly blessed, we will find purpose, meaning and life even when we are weak and vulnerable. Jesus did. Can we, his followers, do otherwise?

Think about it. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.