

“Blessings and Woes”

Luke 6.17-26

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

February 17, 2019

So was it a “Sermon on the Mount”, or a “Sermon on the Plain”? If you’re in Matthew’s gospel, you read about Jesus calling the first disciples, then healing some people, then going up a mountain, where he gives a big long speech that begins with a series of blessings. It’s called the “Sermon on the Mount.” And if you’re in Luke’s gospel, you read about Jesus calling the first disciples, then healing some people, then standing “on a level place,” where he gives a big long speech that begins with a series of blessings. It’s called the “Sermon on the Plain.” The context and content of the two speeches is similar; was this one speech, or two? And if it was just one, was it on a “mount”, or on a “plain”?

If you go to Galilee, you discover: it could have been both at the same time.

This is called “the Mount of Beatitudes.” Ever since the 4th century, Christians have thought, “This was the place where Jesus gave that sermon.” It is, as you can see, both a mountain *and* a plain.

Capernaum is very close to the Mount of Beatitudes, only a mile away. The Sea of Galilee is even closer. The top of the mountain is only 500 feet higher than the surface of the sea, so it is a small mountain. When you get to the top, you discover just how flat and expansive it is. You’ve got a gorgeous view of the lake in front of you, and plenty of room for a large crowd of people to gather.

So it’s a mountain with a plain at the top. Do we *know* that this was the spot where Jesus gave that sermon? No. There’s no *proof*. But it fits both descriptions, and the location makes good sense.

Today there’s a Franciscan chapel on this mountaintop plain. There’s also a large monastery up here, and a large open area for worship. There are beautiful gardens, with flowers and palm trees, and a series of stone markers imprinted with the words of the Beatitudes, in Hebrew and English and Latin. It’s a lovely place – a beautiful setting in which to sit at the feet of our Master, and learn from him.

The Sermon on the Mount – or the Plain – begins with the Beatitudes. “Beatus” is a Latin word that means “blessed.” These are a series of *blessings* Jesus gives to particular groups of people. Matthew’s gospel lists the familiar ones: “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” ... and so on. Eight blessings, or nine, depending on how you count. Luke’s version is a little different; there are just *four* blessings, which are followed by four “woes.” It is not “Blessed are

the poor in spirit,” but rather, “Blessed are you who are poor.” It is not “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” but, “Blessed are you who are hungry, now.” We tend to be more familiar with Matthew’s version; today, we’re looking at Luke’s. (Maybe Jesus gave *two* sermons up here!)

Luke says there were a lot of people up here, “a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.” Some of these people had come a long way. Tyre and Sidon are 35 to 40 miles away; Jerusalem is more than 80 miles away; these people would have *walked* here. They have heard about Jesus; they have come for teaching; they have come for healing. They have come looking for *hope*.

Jesus gives them what they are looking for. He heals those who have come in search of healing; he teaches those who have come looking for instruction; he blesses all of them.

There are, as I said, four blessings and four woes in Luke’s version of this story. Those are linked together; there is a woe that corresponds to each blessing. Let’s walk through each corresponding pair.

First: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God;” and “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” Jesus is not talking about people who are poor or rich *metaphorically*, or *spiritually*. He’s talking about people who are genuinely poor, and people who are truly wealthy. This should not surprise us; when Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth, he read these words from the book of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news *to the poor*.” (Luke 4:18) Jesus cares about people who are poor. Poor people, says Jesus, have a blessing from God. The world may look up to the wealthy – but God honors the poor.

Now, he’s not talking about people who are poor because they are lazy and don’t want to work. He’s also not talking about people who are poor because they’ve made some really stupid financial decisions – spending all their income frivolously on pleasures, or gambling away their life’s savings, with the result that they have nothing left. No, he’s talking about people who are poor *despite* the fact that they are working hard. He’s blessing the people who are stuck in an economic situation they can’t get out of, the people who are working hard, and for whom it’s *just not enough* to meet their basic needs. He’s not blessing the people who are greedily trying to get a handout when they could be working. We get people in here from time to time, asking for a handout, and it’s always a tough call: are these people *truly* impoverished, or are they trying to take advantage of us? There are some people who are skilled liars and con artists, who are basically trying to steal from us; there are others who are truly needy. It is *those* people whom Jesus seeks to bless, *those* people who are special recipients of gospel love.

But what about the rich? “Woe to you who are rich,” says Jesus, “for you have received your consolation!” That word “woe” expresses disfavor from God, with an implied threat: *watch out*. Your day of reckoning may be coming! Is Jesus saying it’s not okay to be rich? No. Generosity is lifted up as a virtue elsewhere in the New Testament. Wealth is a sign of God’s favor elsewhere in the Bible. The problem is not *having a lot of money*. The problem is *having a lot of money and being selfish and greedy about it*. If you have been blessed with wealth by God, *hoarding* it is not an acceptable option. “Give, and it will be given to you,” says Jesus, later on in this sermon. (Luke 6:38) “Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered,” says a proverb (Proverbs 21:13); “it is well

with the man who deals generously and lends,” says a psalm (Psalm 112:5). You can have wealth – as long as you’re generous with it. Jesus’s woe was directed towards people who were wealthy *and selfish*.

Next: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled,” and “woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.” These lines express the same sentiment, except with *food* rather than *money*. Jesus cares about people who don’t have enough food to eat. There’s a reason why we support the food pantry; there’s a reason why we collect the two cents a meal offering every month. Jesus does not want people to go hungry in this world of plenty. And if the people who have an ample supply of food were willing to give more of it away, there would be a lot fewer hungry people in the world.

Next: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh,” and “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.” There are all sorts of reasons why people weep. The loss of a loved one, the death of a marriage, receiving a terrible diagnosis, watching your child make one poor choice after another, the list goes on. For people who are crying, the gospel of Jesus Christ is filled with good news. Death *is* going to be beaten; illness *is* going to be eradicated; maybe not in *this* world, but certainly in the next. The hope that awaits us is *so much greater* than the suffering we experience here on earth. There is coming a joyful, radiant day, when God will truly make *all things* new.

But the people who are laughing, says Jesus, will mourn and weep. He’s not talking about the genuine laughter we have when we experience true joy. He’s talking about those times and situations when people laugh at the expense of others. When some people laugh at other people’s suffering. When some people get pleasure by putting other people down. If someone is laughing and another person is hurting – it’s not funny. It’s just *not*. There’s a difference between *joyful* laughter and *cruel* laughter. All those people who laugh with *cruelty* in their hearts – well, Jesus says, *their day is coming*.

Fourth, and finally: “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man;” and “Woe to you when all speak well of you.” Whose praise are we looking for in this world – the praise of other people? Or the praise of God? You can seek out fame and glory, or you can follow the truth that Jesus offers. If you choose to follow the truth that Jesus offers, there may be some people who will mock you, ridicule you, look down on you. That is a cross you may have to bear. What’s *popular* and what’s *right* are two different things. The false prophets in the Old Testament said the things that people wanted to hear, rather than the things that God wanted them to say. Who are you trying to please? **What matters to you more:** fame in this world, or a reward in the next? If a day comes when we have to choose between what is *popular* and what is *right*, we have to be willing to risk ridicule now, which will be replaced later on by a crown of glory. We need to keep our eyes focused on the eternal joy we will feel when we receive praise and honor from God – not on the fleeting joy we will feel when we receive praise and honor from people.

Four blessings, for woes. In four broad strokes, Jesus outlines two different sets of attitudes. There are the greedy and the generous; the selfish and the sharing; the mean-spirited and the kind-hearted; the wicked, and the righteous. We all know which set of attitudes is better. The challenge is *doing* what God asks us to do. Let us always, and humbly, ask God for guidance, direction, and courage.

© 2019 Rev. Bill Pinches