

Psalm 126

Luke 6:17-26

February 17, 2019

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE BEATITUDES AND OUR ATTITUDES

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In a recent conversation over supper, a good friend of mine told me about a cartoon he had seen. The first panel showed a man and God sitting side-by-side on a park bench. The visibly upset man was haranguing God, “How long, O Lord? Why is there poverty in the world, violence, hunger, war, evil, and innocent people suffering? Why, Lord?” In the second panel, God replies, “Funny – I was just about to ask you the same question!”

Back in 2006, Pat Barrow and I were riding in the bed of a pickup truck down the main street of the little town of Libertad, Tabasco, Mexico. He and I were there with Charles, Greg, Mike, and Eduardo to visit our then-partner church and to help them build a mission church out in the countryside. The folks we were visiting were “middle-class” in their town – teachers, farmers, employees of the state oil company, etc. – but the circumstances in which they lived would not have come close to “middle class” in the United States.

That day, in the back of the pickup truck, Pat and I talked about the financial disparity between our congregation back home and the folks in the congregation we were visiting in Libertad. Then we got around to talking about the disparities in our home county of Duplin. I won’t say we threw up our hands in despair, but we did kind of scratch our heads, and we have had the same discussion many times over the years.

In our own community, we have food drives and church food pantries and the Blessings in Store on Main Street and Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries on Norwood Street and coat and school supply drives for students and St. Nicholas projects and offerings for Hungry Children and the Backpack Ministry and the list goes on and on. And all of those things are needed. All of those things are good. All of those things, I hope, are appreciated.

But, you know, there is a line between charity and policy, and you can cross it at your own risk, especially in the church. That’s usually when folks say, “Well, he’s gone from preaching to meddling” or “The church ought to stick to spiritual matters and not get involved with public policy.” That’s an age-old debate in the church that has never been satisfactorily resolved. But that doesn’t mean Jesus’ teachings don’t confront us with some easy to understand but hard to live by teachings.

As I was working on this sermon, I came across an article by Peter Vander Meulen of the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University in Texas. The article is called “Do Justice – Keep It Simple” and it included this line that just wouldn’t leave me alone all week: “Have we gone the route of charity rather than justice because of

fear rooted in ignorance of what is required of us?”¹ And what is required of us? Well, in the famous words of Micah 6:8, “To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.” And that is what Jesus is talking about in his Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke.

We’re more familiar with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Aside from the obvious difference that the “sermon” in Luke is much shorter than the one in Matthew, there is another noticeable difference. In Matthew 5, Jesus is up on the mountain, like a new Moses. In Luke, Jesus goes up on the mountain by himself to pray, but he comes back down onto the even place/the plain among the people – people from Judea and Jerusalem, from Tyre and Sidon, probably Jews and Gentiles – to teach them about the kingdom of God.

If I asked you to repeat some of Jesus’ beatitudes, you might answer, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” And you would be right – if you were quoting from Matthew 5! But in Luke’s story, Jesus says, “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.” Try as we might (and as much as we might want to), we really can’t “spiritualize” the beatitudes in Luke. Jesus really is talking about people who are poor and hungry.

And that is consistent with Jesus’ teaching and ministry in Luke’s gospel. When Mary sang praises after Gabriel told her she was going to have a baby, she remembered how God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” When Jesus preached in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he read from the scroll of Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Jesus told a parable about a farmer who gloated over his excess crops and planned to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, only to die that very night. Jesus met a rich young man and commended him for his religious piety; but the man walked away sorrowful, because he couldn’t bring himself to put into practice what he believed, for he had many possessions.

In a sense, Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain is like a mirror that he holds up to our lives. Only when we look in the mirror, we don’t see a reflection of the life as we know it, but life from God’s perspective. In their book *Resident Aliens* from Duke Divinity School, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon observe that, “Christians begin our ethics not with anxious, self-serving questions about what we ought to do as individuals to make history come out right, because in Christ, God has already made history come out right. The ‘sermon on the plain’ is the inauguration manifesto of how the world looks now that God in Christ has taken matters in hand. In other words, these blessings and woes announce that God, in Jesus Christ, already sees the world in a strikingly different way than we do. The ‘real world,’ for all those who are in Christ, is one in which most of the major status roles in life are utterly reversed.”²

Contrary to the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, there are four pairs of well-balanced blessings AND woes in the Sermon on the Plain – poor & rich; hungry & full; weeping

& laughing; hatred/defaming & speaking well. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus reserves his "woes" for the scribes and Pharisees. In his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus talks to everyone there that day – rich and poor? And, of course, Jesus talks about attitudes AND actions, beliefs and practices. Just one chapter later in Luke, some messengers from John the Baptist ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Luke 7:20, 22-23)

The cartoon in today's bulletin showed up in my Wednesday emails.



I wanted to share it with you because it is a good explanation of the "woes" in these beatitudes. Jesus doesn't condemn riches per se (neither here nor elsewhere), but he does warn against our attitude towards riches, which is another way to talk about attitudes of self-serving and self-preservation. And our beatitudes attitudes will influence how we hear Jesus' words and act on them (or not!).

So, what is our reaction to these beatitudes?

Do we try to justify the existence of the poor among us? After all, even Jesus seems to do that, when he answers the critics of the woman who anointed his feet at Bethany, "For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." (Matthew 26:11) But Jesus is referring to Deuteronomy 15:11, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" (Deuteronomy 15:11)

Or do we convince ourselves that at least some, if not all of the poor, somehow deserve it or want to be that way? But the sinister other side of that argument is that we who are blessed think that we deserve what we have. And, you know, I've never heard anyone who was blessed wonder, "Why me? Why did God let this happen to me?"

Or we try to rationalize Jesus' teachings – "Well, that was back then and this is now." But the economic disparities of Jesus' day were very real and very challenging for the majority of the people who were listening to him that day on the plain. The disparities are just as real and challenging still today. And, after all, how much is

enough? It's easy to compare ourselves favorably to the people in the higher brackets and convince ourselves, "We don't really have all that much," but we very rarely compare ourselves to the folks in the lower brackets and admit, "Well, we really do have a lot!"

As I sat at the table with Jaco my housemate at Justo Mwale University in Zambia in September, he shared with me some of what he was teaching his students. We started talking about cultural differences between the U.S. and Zambia, and he quoted the statistic that the vast majority of Zambians have to get by on \$2 a day. That's two U.S. dollars! I don't know about you, but I couldn't get by on \$2 a day. But you don't have to travel to Zambia to discover financial challenges and disparities. Census information for our own Duplin County indicates: per capita income of \$18,529 (which is 2/3 of the North Carolina per capita, 3/5 of U.S.); median household income of \$36,679 (which is 3/4 of the North Carolina median, 2/3 of the U.S.); and a poverty rate of 26.3% (which is about 1.5 times higher than the NC average of 16.2%, nearly double the U.S. rate of 14.6%). You and I aren't Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, but how much is enough?

Or we can try to romanticize the Beatitudes, and stick with Matthew's version: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." But that's not what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Plain. And, as someone has pointed out, "Vested interests will often prefer a Christianity that will leave the status quo as it is and focus only on the world to come. . . Nazareth was not an announcement about another world and a far off future role, but about mission here and now. [These Beatitudes] are important commentary on blessedness . . . Blessedness in solidarity with the poor and the blessedness of the poor lie ultimately in the blessedness of sharing the life of the God of compassion and change and living out that hope, whatever it means in our situation. Such compassion begins where we are."³

Back in the mid-1990's, on a trip to Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico, our group rowed out to an island of 400 people. Their living conditions were not good – inadequate sewage, questionable water, a poor school, income limited to what they could get for the fish they caught in the lake and sold in the city market. But the people were so welcoming and gracious and generous, sharing their delicious fish and homemade tortillas. Their faith was infectious, vibrant, joyful, alive! That night, as we shared in our group back at the dorm, to a person we commented on the richness of the peoples' faith in such poor conditions. Then my doctor/fisherman friend, Ricky, spoke up and said, "Yes, they had a vibrant faith, but don't think for a minute that the parents on that island don't wish they could provide better conditions for their children." Then he told us how he practiced medicine in those same conditions thirty minutes from our doorsteps in rural Halifax County, NC.

Some of you may have decided a while ago that I've gone from preaching to meddling today. So be it! Of course there has always been a debate in the church about the relationship between our faith/spiritual life on the one hand and our involvement in public policy, on the other. Since 1946, our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has maintained an Office of Public

Witness in Washington, D.C. Why? Because our Reformed theology “teaches that because a sovereign God is at work in all the world, the church and Christian citizens should be concerned about public policy. The church has a long history of applying biblically and theologically-based insights to issues that affect the public.” Our forefather in the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition, John Calvin himself, wrote, “Civil magistracy is a calling not only holy and legitimate, but by far the most sacred and honorable in human life.”⁴

As we make our way toward the Lenten season, when we will contemplate the significance and cost of Jesus’ ministry and death, I invite you to join me in wrestling with these Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Plain. I don’t know that we will all agree on each and every thing, but the conversation about who we are and what we are called to do as God’s people is bound to enrich our lives and strengthen our ministry.

I took today’s sermon title from an article I read this week by an Episcopal priest, who quoted from a sermon by a Presbyterian minister named Paul Petersen. I leave you/all of us with these thoughts about our faith, our life, our blessings, and our calling as God’s people:

“Are the beatitudes your attitudes? Do you live the simple, basic life of the poor, apart from the materialistic consumerism that rules our society? Do you mourn over the loss of God as the recognized guide for our society, not the intellectual mourning that judges and condemns society, but the heartfelt grieving of an empty spot in our life? Are you guided by a clear vision of God’s desire for you? Are you persecuted for righteousness’ sake? Do your life attitudes stand in such contradistinction from society’s attitudes that you are considered strange and subversive? If not, why not?”

The Episcopal priest concludes, “The beatitudes call us to look at our lives and accept the blessings God gives us as signs of God’s faithfulness to us and in return to live in such a way that we show by word and example our faithfulness and commitment to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ to others. Just showing forth such blessings in our lives will be a blessing for others. Thanks be to God!”⁵

Let us pray: O God, you have shown us what is good, and call us to remember that what you require is not repayment of debt or settling the score, but obedience. Show us, God, when to do justice, how to love kindness, and where to walk, humbly, with you. Amen.

NOTES

¹Peter Vander Meulen, “Do Justice – Keep It Simple,” at www.baylor.edu.

²Cited in “Blessing or Curse?” by Rev. Sarah Jackson Shelton, February 11, 2007 at www.day1.org.

³William Loader, “Epiphany 6: February 17, 2019,” at wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au.

⁴Office of Public Witness at www.presbyterianmission.org.

⁵The Right Rev. Robert G. Tharp, TEC, “Sermon for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time,” February 11, 2001, Luke 6:17-26 at www.day1.org.