

“The Sermon on the Level”

Jeremiah 17: 7: 10, Luke 6: 17—23

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Did you fill in the blanks? Blessed are the poor.... Did you feel yourself saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit?” We have expectations that every Gospel repeats the same thing. So we amalgamate it, we homogenize it, we mix it all together, leave some things out, put some things in, and make it comfortable.

We are far more likely to know the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew chapter 5: Jesus went up on a Mountain, and said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, they shall be comforted.” Spirit. Comfort. That is what Matthew gives us. Spiritualized comfort. I love that sermon.

The problem is, the gospel of Luke says something else. That may be Surprising for some of us: Jesus does not repeat the same thing over and over.

Whereas Matthew records Jesus going up on the Mountaintop, Luke records a different event. Luke tells about Jesus going out to a large, flat place. This is not the Sermon on the Mount, this is the Sermon on the Plain. It’s time for some plain talking. Sermon on the level: So let’s level with each other.

To whom is Jesus talking? Word traveled to a huge area. Jesus attracted a great diversity of people. Not just 12 apostles. People from all countries, all races, all religions. People whose interactions with the world meant they needed healing. People whose lives had become crazy: Jesus calmed the craziness. To understand this passage, you have to not forget where it starts: The healing and the calming.

Jesus talks about blessings. “Blessed are you who are poor.” It’s hard to translate into English, because it comes out a bit rough for us. TO translate more literally, the Greek text says: “Blessed are you poor.” Plain talk to people in poverty. Jesus has a message: God has not forgotten or abandoned you. As some theologians term it, God has a “preferential option for the poor.” God cares about the poor; they have not been forgotten.

This is plain talking: in a places of hurt in real life. Where there is poverty, pain, misery, and suffering. We must not ignore it, downplay it or pretend it is not happening. Jesus is talking on the level here. Jesus makes it absolutely clear: God cares about the poor.

If God cares about the poor, then what about us? It's easy to see why we would run back to the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew has twice as many blessings, and no list of woes. Which is to say, the Sermon on the Plain has ½ as many blessings, and adds this list of woes.

This can be a very uncomfortable message. How we read the woes matters. If we read it as a sense of judgement, we are likely to hear all those stereotypical angry preacher tones of eternal damnation, which instills a sense of guilt in us. The problem is, never ending guilt can drive you crazy. And remember, this is a sermon about Jesus curing the craziness.

There is another way of understanding these words of "woe" that are more consistent with Jesus wanting to bring healing, stop the craziness. That is woe as a sense of empathy. Pathos. "Woe to you who are rich, you've already received your consolation." Woe: what if your time of truth has come, and you did not see it. It was right in front of you, but you missed it.

Every 5 years, I look forward to my high school Class Reunion. I was class President. Co-captain of the football team. And track team. Doggone it, people liked me. I still have social capital. And I enjoy talking with old friends and pick up where the story left off. Every five years, the reunion always happens in the fall. I look forward to it.

In the middle of last July, I went see my brother, who lives in my hometown. We went to a restaurant, and I see one of my classmates sitting on the bar stool... where he has been sitting for half a century. We smile at each other. We're happy to see each other. I say, "Hey, when's the reunion this year? He says, "Woe, man, it was last week. You missed it."

Pathos. Ooohhh. I can't get that back.

A class reunion is a little thing. But what if you missed the big event of your whole life? What if someone misses the meaning of their life? Their calling? What God has in mind for you? What if you look back and realize that you missed the meaning of your life? That is a different meaning of woe. What a tragedy: If your moment comes, and you missed it.

In Joseph Conrad's novel, *Lord Jim*, for his whole life, Jim wanted to be a sea captain. He fantasized, he dreamed about what a great captain he would be. The day comes, he is a crewman on a large boat with many passengers. The engine goes out. The captain the officers are the first declare the situation hopeless, and they abandon ship.

As their lifeboat pulls away, they call to Jim that the situation is hopeless. They tell him he will die without purpose. He should join them. As the moment of truth, Jim abandons ship. Only to discover later, the ship survived. He could have been the hero. In that event, he had shown himself to be a coward. Not a captain. Woe, Jim, you missed it. Woe to you.

In the gospel of Luke, the poor, the hungry, the bereaved, those oppressed for speaking the truth, they are in God's concern. Nobody else seems to care. The rich. Those who are living comfortably. Those whose lives are happy.

Those who never say anything to make anyone upset. To them, God has given gifts to steer the ship. But they abandoned the poor. God blessed, but they abandoned. That is what woe means: You had your moment, but you spent it on yourself, instead of looking to where God was looking.

This passage in Luke talks about Jesus ability to heal, both physical and spiritual hurts. The passage talks about people trying to reach out and touch Jesus, for "power came out of him." Jesus is electric. Dynamic. Powerful. I wonder how much of his power came from his words of faith in God's grace, forgiveness, caring and presence. Words of faith have the power to change perspectives and change the world.

We have those same words of faith. How many times words have incredible power. The power to change us.

There is the power of love, shown in acts of extreme generosity. The power of Christ moves in this church in many ways. In one form, you gave over \$300,000 in mission this last year to those who were homeless, hungry, in mourning. Because you put your money in the offering, made your pledge, gave to the endowment. You helped cast out the hopelessness, and fill people with hope. You were blessed to be a blessing. And you have shared that blessing. Nevertheless, we have this passage from Luke to move us to ask: Did we do all that we have been called to do? Not as a sense of judgement. But to make sure that we do not miss the meaning of our lives. We have this opportunity. It does not come again. God has empowered us.

We know God has blessed us. We have this opportunity to feel the blessing even more when the power of Christ works through us, as we reach out and care for the poor. The oppressed. Those in need.

God is eager to have the blessings of the good news take root deeply in our lives, in our societies, and in our culture. The only way this works is if we push ourselves to reimagine our expectations. Especially our expectations of what our world can yet be, and our expectations of ourselves. Of what we can yet be.

The gospel is an invitation to a healed world, a world that is not crazy in all these destructive ways. In fact, maybe we just say Jesus wants it to be crazy good. That is what the Kingdom of God is like.

For these new expectations to take root, the good news has to claim every aspect of who we are, and what our lives are about. God pushes our assumptions in ways that both disorient us and cure us. God challenges us because God cares for every human being, especially those who are poor, hungry, mourning, and those oppressed for opening their mouths and speaking the truth about God's view on the world. When we let Jesus reorient us, we discover God yearning and overwhelmingly eager to fill the hearts of every one of us with joy.

Sources:

Matthew L. Skinner. *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*. Brazos Press.