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C: Epiphany 6 – The Beatitudes
Luke 6:17-26, Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1

13 February 2022
Salem, Bridgeport

“Leveling the Playing Field”

So let’s test your biblical knowledge here for a minute...

What is this section of scripture, this sermon, these sayings of Jesus, often called?

And is this the only place in the Bible where this is recorded?

What are the differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s account?

Well, there are several.

In Matthew there are 8 blessings and in Luke there are 4 blessings & 4 corresponding woes.

Matthew focuses on the spiritual condition of people while Luke focuses on the material.

So, for example, Matthew says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit...”,

but Luke says, “Blessed are the poor...”.

And finally there are two different settings in Matthew and Luke.

What’s the setting in Matthew? And Luke?

And that’s not surprising.

We’ve been reading the Gospel of Luke since the First Sunday in Advent

and I think the first sermon I preached on Luke this year

was called “The Great Leveling” – because that’s Luke’s primary theme.

In God’s eyes we are all equal, and God isn’t happy that we don’t live that way.

Mary said that God will “cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly”,

that God will “feed the hungry with rich things and send the rich away empty”.

And so Jesus came to teach us how to live in God’s kingdom on earth,

how to give up our power in submission to God’s power, how to level the playing field.

So is it any wonder that Luke places this teaching about how God’s leveling the playing field,

not on a mountain, but on a plain – literally “a level place”?!

The point is clear!

So that’s the first thing to notice in our gospel today:

the setting itself symbolizes the teaching – a level place.

The second thing I want us to look at is what the words “Blessed” and Woe” mean.

Now you’ll note that the Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah that was chosen to go with this Gospel also has a word translated “blessed”.

That reading talks about how God will bless some and curse others.

But it’s actually not a good lesson to pair with Luke’s

because the word that is translated “blessed” here in Luke is not the same as that in Jeremiah.

In Jeremiah the Hebrew word is “baruch” – which does indeed mean “blessed”,

in the sense that God is pronouncing a blessing, sending a blessing, creating a blessing.

There is a similar difficulty with the Psalm for the day,

because the word translated “happy” in the psalm is also a different word

than is sometimes used to translate the Beatitudes in our gospel reading.

In the Psalm it is not so much a result of God’s intentional action,

but more a consequence of a particular behavior.

It’s not that if you read God’s Word, God will bless you;

it’s more like the reading of God’s Word will bring happiness as a natural consequence.

But the Greek word in our gospel today that is here translated “blessed”

does not actually mean either “blessed” or “happy”.

The word would better be translated “respected”, “looked up to”, “deserving of divine and human respect”.

So when we read, “Blessed are the poor”, what Luke is actually saying in the original language

is that we should look up to the poor, we should honor the poor, we should respect the poor,

we should see ourselves in a position lower than the poor,

we should kneel before the poor in humility, with respect and reverence,

seeing them as people who have something that we lack.

And when we read the word “woe”, it does not mean the same thing as “cursed”.

When Jesus says “Woe to you who are rich”, it doesn’t mean God is going to curse the rich.

It would be better translated “Alas, those of you who are rich” –

in the sense of being sorry for those who are rich.

It is Jesus looking at the rich and feeling sorry for them and saying something like,

“Alas, I’m sorry that you just can’t see it,

but your riches are causing you to isolate/separate yourselves from the poor

who can give you something that is far more satisfying than any material wealth you can have”.

Now since the average annual income worldwide is less than \$10,000,

that would seem to place us all in the “rich” category, and that certainly wouldn’t be good news.

But here again is where the gospel differs from the Old Testament lesson.

In Jeremiah it seems as if certain people are blessed and certain other people are cursed.

In other words, it’s like the way some people interpret Jesus’ sheep and goats parable,

that is, if Jesus were suddenly to return and show up right here and right now

he would look at each one of us and say,

“All right, you’re a sheep so you go over there” and “You’re a goat so you go over there”.

That’s how some interpret the parable – some people (the sheep) go to heaven

and some people (the goats) go to hell.

But that’s actually not what we believe Jesus is teaching.

We know that none of us is 100% saint and none of us is 100% sinner.

We are each people who do saintly things and sinful things.

We are not one or the other – we’re “simul justus et peccator”, “at the same time, saint and sinner”.

It’s similar to what we learned in the Council of Churches’ discussions on racism.

It’s not that one person is a racist and another is not.

No one is 100% racist and no one is 100% free from racism.

So it’s not about categorizing people as one thing or the other,

but rather it’s about seeing ourselves where we are,

somewhere on a spectrum between being totally anti-racist and totally racist.

And so we don’t categorize ourselves or other people as a single entity

but rather we look at each thought, word, and action as being either racist or anti-racist,

as being saintly or sinful.

And it’s the same thing here – people are not either rich or poor –

because as we know, every single one of us here is richer than some people and poorer than others.

So as we look at this passage from Luke it’s not as if Jesus is coming here and saying,

“Okay, you right there, you’re poor so I will bless you.

And you over there, you’re rich so I will curse you.

No, what Jesus is saying is that it’s not about what we have or don’t have, because that’s all relative.

What it is about, however, is how we look at other people and how we act towards them.
Jesus is showing us the way to abundant life.

And that way is through seeing the world through different eyes.

It doesn't really matter how much or how little we have in terms of material possessions.
What matters is how we feel about other people.

As long as we see someone as inferior, as less than, as in need of us,
then we are cutting ourselves off from the kingdom of God.

But when we can see every single person as God's gift to us,
as someone God has brought into our lives,
as someone God can use to bless us,
it's then that we find the abundant life Jesus' promises.

The way to the promised land, the way to the kingdom of God, the way to abundant life
is in finding those who we initially look down on
as poor or hungry or sorrowful or oppressed
and shifting our perspective so that instead of looking down we are looking up,
instead of seeing someone who is lacking we see someone who can fill our own lack.

God wants to level the playing field.

And doing that goes totally against what our culture teaches us.

But God's word is clear: the kingdom of God is not the kingdom of this world.

This world's kingdom has the satisfied and the hungry, the rich and the poor
the powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed.

But in God's kingdom we are all of equal value;

in God's kingdom we are called to take a place at the foot of the table;

in God's kingdom we are called to kneel and wash the feet of others;

in God's kingdom we are called to look up at and not down on others;

in God's kingdom we are to see each person's dignity & worth & value as a gift of God to us.

So the good news, the way to abundant life, the way to joy,

doesn't really have to do with whether we see ourselves as rich or poor materially.

What it does have to do with is seeing those we have always viewed
as poor or hungry or sorrowful or oppressed

not as people who are in need of us to save them, or fix them, or make their lives better
in some material way,

but rather as people with the gifts to save us, and fix us, and make our lives better
in a much deeper way.

In other words, what Jesus is saying

is that we need to see others not as the world does, but as God does.

May God open our eyes this week to see someone differently,

and may we find grace not in saving others, but in being saved –
through the Christ that lives in "the least of these".

The Gospel of the Lord!

Thanks be to God! Amen