

“He Stood Among Them”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church
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Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²²"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice 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.

²⁴"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵"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.

²⁶"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

If at least part of today's text from Luke sounds familiar,¹ that's a good thing, because it's very close to the passage from Matthew, from the section of the Sermon on the Mount, we call the Beatitudes. Matthew has Jesus teaching on a mountain, early in his ministry, to show that his teaching comes from God.

Luke, on the other hand, has Jesus preaching in the sixth chapter, to crowds of people from all over. A great crowd. A great multitude we are told. Jesus has already gained a following. And Luke has Jesus preaching on a level place, the word level used in the Bible most often to

¹ In understanding this passage, I have relied heavily on three sources:
 Ronald Allen, "Commentary on Luke 6:17-26"
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3960

Brian P. Stofregen, Exegetical Notes at Crossmarks Christian Resources, Luke 6.17-26
 6th Sunday after the Epiphany - Year C <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke6x17.htm>

D. Mark Davis, "Reality and Ideality," Monday, February 11, 2019
<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2019/02/reality-and-ideality.html>

describe hunger and suffering and brokenness. That's where Jesus is preaching. With the people. In the messiness and hurt of their lives.

The people, the people from all over, are there to hear Jesus, maybe....
 But even more than that they are there to touch Jesus.
 To latch on to him, because Luke tells us Jesus was in a healing state.
 The people gathered want to be the recipients of the power that is flowing out from him.

It is here that Jesus starts to preach. To teach. And like Matthew, he starts with blessings.

Blessed meaning- not that you are happy
 or that you should be satisfied with your lot in life
 or that everything is fixed,
 but blessed to mean that even when you are hurting,
 when you are struggling, when life is not fair,
 a faithful promise that tomorrow won't be like today,
 and there is a place for you in God's kingdom.

Luke doesn't stop with blessedness, of course.
 In Luke, we've got woes, too.
 Lots of them. And they can be hard to hear.

As the commentary podcast I listened to this week suggested,
 "Nobody's cross-stitching this on a pillow."²

Woe to you-
 Woe, meaning unhappiness, the opposite of blessed, the absence of hope.
 Pain. Anguish.

Woe to the rich, Jesus says in Luke, to the full, to the laughing.

It's a complex paragraph Luke has woven, Jesus has preached,
 one that speaks of what is to come and what is now.
 They are words that call us to seeing the world as it should be as well as how it is,
 and how that affects those who are living on all sides of the storm.

Much of how you hear this text, whether or not this sounds like Good News to you,
 probably has to do with where you find yourself in it.

My colleague Rebecca Gillespie Messman writes:³

If you just learned that your job was eliminated, or if you considered picking up a few hours in another job to make ends meet, there is no better news.

² <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/epiphany6c>

³ Shared by the Rev. Rebecca Gillespie Messman in an email to the preaching group The Well on February 16, 2019.

If it dawns on you that you just decluttered your home and gave away bags of clothes, more than most people could afford in a year, it might sting.

If you are having a hard time getting through meetings because depression and grief have spun your thinking into fog, there is no better news.

If you feel like things have been almost too easy lately, it might prick you with a sense of foreboding.

If you know where food pantries are, if you have ever waited in at a soup kitchen, if you have ever filled out the free and reduced lunch paperwork or added more water to the soup, if you have ever called numerous times to the hospital kitchen and still no one has come to your room and your stomach growls, this sermon has the whiff of delicious hope.

But, if you lament how much food you ate yesterday, if you are pained by how the scale keeps ticking up a pound or two, if you feel guilty about all the food that you had to discard because it went bad in the fridge, this sermon may bring on indigestion.

If you have felt rejected by people who should have loved you, experienced the cold shoulder at church or in the lunchroom or in the office, if you have been laid off or fired, if you have ever been pulled over or followed in a store because of your skin color, or if you know in your bones the terror of possible violence because of what you believe or what you look like or who you love, Jesus' words are a shield of dignity.

But, if you feel the constant lure of people pleasing, if you trust your personality and your looks to keep you safe from loneliness, if your faith tends to be non-threatening to others, his words are cold comfort.

So. Is this passage Good News to you?

I suspect that you, maybe like me, are finding it a bit more complicated than that.

I suspect that most of you know what it is to carry more than one thing at once. To know the blessing of a full table while at the same time the woe of broken trust. Because life is complicated and messy, and rarely ever clear cut or obvious.

As Truvey Jones said in Steel Magnolias, “Laughter through tears is my favorite emotion.”

This text should both comfort and challenge us,
both inspire and cause us to pull up short.

And that's just the beginning.

The commentaries struggle with what Jesus is recommending here.

Are we supposed to try to be blessed?

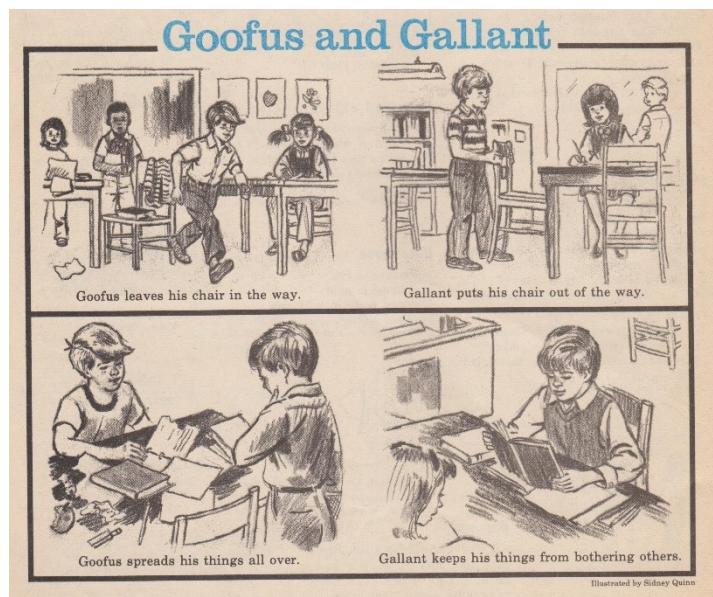
Well, no.

Because even though the poor are blessed as well as the hungry and the weeping,
those aren't things that are lifted up as practices we should all emulate.

This isn't about “happy are the poor and we should all be like them.”

Are we supposed to want to be in a position to be woe-d?
 To be full when someone else at your table is hungry? No.

That's not Jesus' point, either.
 In Jesus' time, the faithful people of the time were very focused on figuring out
 who was right and who was wrong.
 Who was in and who was out.
 Who was clean and who was unclean.



And we're like that, too, aren't we?

We like a good, clear choice. Like Goofus and Gallant in the old Highlights magazines.⁴ You know who you were supposed to choose, whose behavior you were supposed to emulate. It's right there in their names as well as in their actions.

Binary choices that are clear.
 War or peace? I choose peace!
 Love or hate? I choose love?

Hate can come in many different forms, often without hate on the label, and so can love.
 Peace can often require hard truth telling, repentance, and redemptive justice to be real.

One of the points, I believe, Jesus is making here, is that life and faith doesn't work that way.
 And this is a powerfully different message.
 Because look at the dichotomies Luke presents.

- poor vs. rich
- hungry vs. filled up
- crying vs. laughing
- hated, etc. vs. spoken well of

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goofus_and_Gallant

It's set up in a way that you would think we are supposed to choose one,
 but we aren't
 and Jesus doesn't then go on to give us the answer!

And so, maybe, Jesus is also making the point here that we need to stop looking for sides and choices, answers, and categories.

Life IS messy.
 Life IS complicated.
 Maybe the answer isn't an answer at all,
 it's in letting go of the idea that there is just one answer.

Look at the beginning of this text.
 We're clearly told that there are people from all other, from different places,
 and yet we're also clearly told that there was just one crowd.

With the blessings and woes,
 neither side is the one we're supposed to inhabit in the kingdom.

And maybe that is that exactly the point-
 to tell us we need fewer categories and more community.
 Less binary and more grace.



Last night, Ben and I went to hear Bela Fleck play the banjo at Carnegie.

Fleck plays the banjo. And yet, up on stage, there were at least nine banjos up there with him. Nine. They were all banjos, of different size and tone and history and significance, but they were all banjos.

Why do we have trouble accepting that there can be multiple right answers to one question?

Why do we believe, to quote Ricky Bobby's father in Talladega Nights that
 "If you aren't first, you're last."

If we have a living wage, companies will have to cut jobs.
 People are either legal or illegal.
 There is a difference between how we behave in public and private.
 If your church isn't growing it's dying.

Who told us there were only two possible answers?

That we have to choose left or right instead of
one of the infinite options in the 180 degrees between left and right?

I wonder if letting go of our binary view of the world is part of what Jesus is trying to teach us in this sermon, because I also see the youth of our world, as so often happens, trying to teach us older folks a similar thing to what Jesus was teaching.

That life is not nearly as clear-cut as we might like it.

More and more I'm hearing from youth and young adults that they feel like the choices they've been given are false.

They are tired of the either/ors the world has tried to demand they adopt.

Gay or straight.

Republican or Democrat.

Geek or Jock.

Male or Female.

Spiritual or Religious.

Who said that these were their only choices, these binary options?

Is it any wonder that we're hearing words like genderfluid and and pansexual and independent more and more frequently?

And some of these changes I won't claim to understand.

The world seems to be moving awfully fast to me.

This is one of the places this text is working on me,

challenging me to consider whether or not my desire to understand

is just another way to categorize, to control, to imagine I have some control over life.

Do I have to understand in order to love? Is that what God requires of me?

Is that what Jesus wanted of the people hearing that sermon on the plain?

Or did he want them to let go of their assumptions and expectations and categories,

their societal norms,

because thinking that God loved those who were successful

and that God was punishing the poor

was getting the way of their seeing God.

God requires I show love, share hope, make space for those whose voices are unheard.

How can that not include all of the people, as Jesus' sermon did,

when it reminds us that life isn't about rich or poor

but the love we share that makes us one?

Love which doesn't let people stay in the cold.

Love which welcomes at the table.

Love which enjoys giving and sharing.

Love which knows that there is no young or old, for none of us is promised more than this day.

Which instrument on the stage was a banjo?
They all were.

Can we let life blur our boundaries, our categories, and find Jesus there?

The good news is that Jesus is there. On the level. On the plain.
In your lives. In mine.
If you are struggling, Jesus wants you to know that there is hope.
And in those places where you are trusting the world more than you are God,
Jesus wants you to know that there is another path you can choose, because that one
leads nowhere.

The good news is that Jesus is there.
Is here.
In blessings and woes and everything in between.
Amen.