

Text: Luke 6: 17-26  
Title: Plain Talk  
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Roger Allen Nelson

At the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee there's a lovely green hill that rises up off the shore. The hill is wide, the slope is gentle; and sort of hollowed out in the middle forming a natural amphitheater, it is the traditional location for the "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus would have stood on that hill and spoke to those gathered, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...."

Today the ruins of a 4th century monastery can be seen at the bottom of the hill and at the top there sits a beautiful chapel built and maintained by the Franciscans. Today the hill is covered with flowering bushes, manicured lawns, and quiet places to read and reflect on the words of Jesus – if the giant parking lot lined with buses and the constant chatter of people taking selfies doesn't distract.

There's no such place of remembrance for the "Sermon on the Plain."

There's no chapel, or garden, or tour guide.

There's no souvenir shop or respite for spiritual pilgrims.

In Luke's gospel Jesus prays at night on a mountainside. In the morning he gathers his disciples, chooses 12 as apostles, and then descending the mountain stops at a level place and delivers his first sermon. In Matthew he goes up the mountain to preach....

Now, I guess it could be the same place.

Some think that Matthew sets Jesus' sermon on a mountain to harken back to Moses receiving the Law on a mountain, and that Luke places it on a plain to remind us that Jesus was one of us – accessible and earthy. The sermons are similar, so maybe the setting is less historical and more theological?

And, quite frankly, the hill is flat and wide. One person's mountain is another person's plain? Could be the same place. I say tomato; you say tomato....

Who knows?

But, I'm struck by Luke's set up.

Luke uses language that emphasizes the size of the crowd and geographic markers that point to its cultural and ethnic breadth. These are not just followers from the Galilean hills, but from far and wide these are the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. And Luke notes that they are trying to touch Jesus "because power was coming from him and healing them all."

Most every day Roseland Christian Ministries pushes open its doors to serve a hot lunch to those who live on the margins. As I drove up earlier this week I was reminded that the vibrant-city-life that existed here almost 40 years ago when I was a college intern is gutted. The sidewalks are empty, the stores are boarded up, the houses are raggedy-run-down and vacant. Many have died

and those with the wherewithal have moved out to South Holland, and Hazel Crest, and Harvey, and Northwest Indiana.

So, when I went into the lunch room the 60 or so men and women that greeted me were the last, the least, and the left behind. A woman who walks the streets gave me a big grin with a few snaggle teeth and reached out for a high-five with long fake nails, a gentle-hearted-mentally-ill guy called my name from the corner, and one man glared at me through broken glasses while another stood to bow and shake my hand....

And to them Jesus says,

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.  
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh....*

There's a chapel commemorating the Sermon on the Mount because the language is sanguine and sublime, "Blessed are the poor in the spirit... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."

The Sermon on the Plain is jagged and jarring. The ground is dusty, the stink of desperation hangs in the air, and the crowd is the last, the least, and the left behind. There's no chapel for them.

Jesus speaks statements of blessing and woe.

In our context "blessed" has a churchy-feel that seems to mean favored or happy or fortunate. And, truth be told, in the New Testament it's a slippery word to translate but the use here is familiar. Jesus is using a proverbial framework: a two-part affirmation that offered a common wisdom.

"Blessed are those who use sun screen for their skin shall remain supple and smooth."  
"Blessed are those who arrive early for they have their choice of seats."  
You get the idea....

Well. Jesus takes that familiar framework and turns it on its head:

*Blessed are the poor....  
Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and insult you...*

That would have pulled the listeners up by the short hairs.

That isn't how things are supposed to work.

And, then Jesus doubles-down by adding statements of "woe."

Again, the "woes" are not in the Sermon on the Mount. And again, "woe" is sort of hard to translate. Woe does not mean "unhappy" or "cursed" or "damned," but chances are that "it was more of an attention-getter or emotion-setter." One scholar likened it to "yikes!"

The point being that Jesus takes the conventional wisdom of the world and flips it over. The things we think are advantages are actually illusory. And, it is probably worth noting here that

the beatitudes are not directions or instructions or advice. They're not telling us what to do. From Jesus' perspective, they're telling us the way things are.

Barbara Brown Taylor offers this take:

*Since we are so used to hearing them by now it is hard for us to get a sense of their original shock value. Perhaps if I said, "Blessed are you who suffer from cancer, for you shall be made whole," or "Blessed are you whose prayers are not answered, for you shall see God face to face." Perhaps if I said, "Woe to you who drive new cars, for you shall walk on foot," or "Woe to you with college degrees, for you have received your reward."*

Now. That's crazy talk!

That's not mountain talk, or plain talk, that's crazy talk!

There's nothing blessed about being poor, or hungry, or hated.

There's nothing blessed about being a refugee on the run from political or economic violence.

There's nothing blessed about having cancer or being abused or living on the margins.

And woe to you with privilege? "Doesn't Jesus know how hard I worked to get here? I'm not like those expecting government hand-outs."

Dear friends, what are we to make of the opening lines of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain?

Let me offer three observations.

One. The blessings and woes on the lips of Jesus are not simply observational proverbs about life. They are what theologians call, "performative." That is to say that the words have power and perform or make true what they represent. These are statements about what it is true today and what will be true when the Kingdom comes in full. As Jesus says them they are an eschatological reality. Not unlike what Luke records as Jesus' first public statement in his hometown synagogue when he unrolls the scroll and reads...

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..... Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*

These words are performative. Even in the hope of a great reversal they are also fulfilled today.

Two. Barbara Brown Taylor thinks of them as something akin to a Ferris wheel. Listen to her description:

*Jesus does not tell anyone to do anything. Instead he describes different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. The Ferris wheel will go around, so that those who are swaying at the top, with the wind in their hair and all the world's lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down right now, where all they can see are candy*

*wrappers in the sawdust, will have their chance to touch the stars. It is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone on that wheel.*

Three. I don't know quite what to make of these beatitudes, but I want to go back to the crowd on the plain. Jesus is speaking not just to his disciples and there is nothing here to indicate that we can spiritualize what he's saying. But rather to a representative cross-section of humanity Jesus speaks blessings and woes.

He speaks to all of us.

No matter how we hear those blessings or woes,  
no matter which ones ring true to you, Jesus speaks them to us all...

To those who are healthy and well fed,  
to those who are eating in a soup kitchen,  
to those hiding secrets,  
to those who think their good fortune is a sign of God's favor,  
to those weary and dirty and distressed,  
to those battling demons....

Jesus doesn't say who's blessed or who's woe-full.

He lets us sort out it.

We're all in this together; a communion of saints.

All on the same wheel.

All level on the same plain.

All belonging to one another.

All belonging to God in Christ.

And the Sermon on the Plain is how he sees us.

May we be receptive and responsive to that same vision.

Amen.