

“Just be happy attitudes?”
Luke 6:17-26
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
2/11/07
The Reverend Michael J Magee, MD

Scene 1 Through Jesus, God levels the playing field

Martin Luther King was an historical figure for whom we have a national holiday. But he was more. He was one of the most important theologians and social activists of last century. But he had only a small repertoire of sermons, the most famous one being the “I have a dream” sermon. He gave that sermon on multiple occasions and in multiple venues. It was his trademark message. Jesus also had a most famous trademark sermon. It is more popularly known as his “Sermon on the Mount.” But in the Good News according to Luke, it was given on a level plain. A level playing field.

“He came down with them and stood on a level place.” In the Good News of Matthew, Jesus gave his most famous sermon on a mountain, like Moses on Mt Sinai. We do not know if Matthew was using metaphorical mountains, if Luke was using a metaphorical level plain, or if Jesus gave the same sermon twice. But none of these issues are important. I think what Luke is saying here is that Jesus leveled the playing field, not just in words and actions, but also in the venue in which he gave this, his most famous sermon.

Scene 2 We all crave and deserve God’s blessing

We have forgotten the power and art of blessing. But the fact is, all of us want to be blessed. All of us want a blessing. All of us are hungry for a blessing. Nothing is more important to children than to have their parent’s blessing. Without the sure knowledge of that blessing, children may spend their entire lives seeking approval or its substitute. I

know a pastor who was interrupted during his sermon. A mentally challenged person interrupted the sermon to say he wanted a blessing. At first the pastor ignored him. But the man was persistent. He wanted a blessing and he wanted it now. Finally the pastor said, OK, but wait until after the worship service, and come forward then. The pastor finished the sermon, and after the postlude, the mentally challenged person ran forward. The pastor closed his eyes, laid his hands on the man's head, and blessed him in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. When the pastor opened his eyes, he was stunned to see that everyone in the church had lined up behind the mentally challenged man to also receive a blessing. All of us feel unworthy, and want a blessing. All of us want to feel worthy before God. Jesus knows this. He 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. "Blessed are you who weep now ... for you will laugh." Blessed are you when people hate, exclude, revile, or "defame you on account of the Son of Man" ... "rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven."

Some call this part of his most famous sermon "the Beatitudes." Jesus' Beatitudes have been interpreted in the past as advice, advice to the poor and the outcast to accept their fate in life. Encouragement to endure their present suffering. Endure it by holding onto hope for reward sometime in the future. To find something good in their predicament, and just be happy. The "Don't worry, be happy attitudes." But I believe that to understand Jesus' sermon like this, is to totally miss his theme. Superficially, it seems Luke says Jesus is proclaiming a future "pie in the sky, bye and bye." But things

are not always what they seem. After all, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. And God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

I believe Jesus speaks instead of the cyclical reversal of fortune. He tells the poor they are not really poor. If they and we will but open our eyes, we all will see that the whole universe belongs to the poor, belongs to us all. This is the economy of God. He tells the hungry it is not God's intention for them to be hungry. The economy of God will provide for them. He tells those who are weeping that God is going to give them something to laugh about. He tells the outcasts that God is going to lift their oppression. But you who are rich "have received your consolation."

Alas, you who are full now "will be hungry."

Alas, you who laugh now "will mourn and weep."

Alas, "when all speak well of you," you are no better than the false prophets of old.

I believe Jesus' next point is that those who feel self-righteous about their good fortunes, compared to the poor and outcast, should not think God loves them more. His next point is that instead, God loves all equally. That favoritism with God cannot be assumed because of current good fortune. I do not think Jesus says woe to those with good fortune because God is "going to get them." I think he says woe to them because good fortune and bad fortune are both cyclical, and God loves all of us equally.

Regardless whether we are from Tyre or Sidon. Regardless whether we are experiencing good fortune or bad fortune. This is the Good News Bible. I believe it would not be good news for us to think God is OK for us to be poor, hungry, sad, or outcast. I believe it also would not be good news for us to think God punishes or instructs with misfortune. I do not think God works this way. This would not be Good News. And

we believe the Bible is Good News. As the song says, Jesus endured the cross and grave, sinners to redeem and save. God through Jesus' earthly life span, sacrifice, and resurrection from nothingness 2000 years ago, shows us that God's judgment is always mercy, and that no one is beyond the power of God's redemption, reconciliation, and forgiveness. God, through Jesus, shows us that nothing can come between us and the love of God.

But I believe God asks us to model Jesus. I believe God asks us to bless others. "Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart."

Scene 3 God calls us to bless others

"A great multitude of people from all of Judea, Jerusalem," and the coasts of Tyre and Sidon came "to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came from him and healed all of them." Tyre and Sidon were ancient Phoenician coastal cities north of Palestine. They had seen better days, but were still the most important Phoenician cities of Jesus' day. Both had few Jews, and of course no Christians. Sidon's patron God was one of healing. So the folks from Sidon seem to be especially interested in Jesus the healer. Remember Jesus in his first sermon told his hometown folks in Nazareth that God's Good News is not just for the Jews, but also for outsiders. Remember that in response, his home town almost threw Jesus off a cliff. As the song says, Jesus "let every kindred, every tribe" come to him.

Frederick William IV of Prussia once visited a school and quizzed the students. He held up a stone and asked the children: to what kingdom does this belong? They responded: mineral. He then, pointed to a flower and asked: to what kingdom does this

belong? They answered: plant. He then pointed to a bird flying by outside the window and asked: to what Kingdom does that belong? They replied: animal. Then he asked: Now, to what kingdom do I belong?

Frederick raises a profound theological question. To what kingdom do you and I belong? In a scientific sense, we are, of course, part of the animal kingdom. I belong to the same kingdom as my family's dog, RC. He has many human traits. He can pout, he can get excited, he has a temper. Only humans can grasp time. His limited mind cannot set goals. RC cannot tell right from wrong. It is not within him to share. All of these are human traits. But yet, RC does not understand time. RC cannot grasp that there is a point beyond which he will not live. He cannot grasp that he only has a limited time during which he can return God's favor by ministering to others. Only a limited time during which he can lift other's Spirits using humor and hope. The magnificent thing for humans is that it is within us to rise above purely animal desires and become a part of another kingdom – the Kingdom of God. "Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart."

Jesus is appealing to our spiritual nature. Appealing to the most unique thing on this planet – the human capacity to love and sacrifice for a cause greater than ourselves.

As we go through life it's easy to miss what is significant. As a boy, a certain future pastor grew up outside of New York City and was a fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers. One day his father took him to his first major league game. It was a World Series game between the Dodgers and the Yankees. He was so excited to see the game, but unfortunately, the Dodgers never got on base. Years later he was spoke with another man who coincidentally was at the same game. The pastor told this man about the World Series game he attended. He said, "It was such a disappointment. I was a Dodgers fan and

the Dodgers never got on base." The man said, "You were there? You were at the game when Don Larsen pitched the first perfect game in all of World Series history?" The pastor replied, "Yeah, but uh, we lost." He then realized that he had been so caught up in his team's defeat that he missed out on the fact that he was a witness to a far greater page of history.

Let me ask you a question. What's going on down the street in our ballpark? We may be so caught up in our personal affairs, and the friends who sit around us, that we miss out on a far greater page in the story of Christianity. Look around you. What is it that is happening in our community? What is it that is happening down the street at your neighbor's house? What is happening down at the playground? What is your spouse or friend trying to tell you? Is God pitching a perfect game in the world series of our neighborhood and we simply are missing out because we are too invested in our team? "Lord, I want to be like Jesus, in my heart."

Conclusion

Sermons on the plain, sermons interrupted by blessings, inhabitants of the kingdom of God, sickness as brokenness, and pitching a perfect game.

In two weeks the nurses and physicians in our church will check blood pressures and review medications for both members and for our visitors. And everyone else will provide them bread and coffee. This is the least we can do to continue the healing ministries begun by Jesus. Luke's Gospel challenges each of us to respond to the call to discipleship and to join the first 12 disciples as followers of Jesus. Not only in Word, but also in action. Not only in creed, but also in deed.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and Amen!