

You Call This a Blessing?
Sermon on Luke 6:17-26 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, February 11, 2007

There are some passages in the Bible that are frankly a mystery. Genesis is full of these mysterious passages. For instance, how did the snake learn to talk (3:1), and what was the mark that God put on Cain so that no one would kill him (4:15)? Or in Genesis 6:4 it says that “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days.... These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown;” but who are the Nephilim and where did they come from? The New Testament also has its share of curious verses, like the ones that say that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is the unforgivable sin (Mk. 3:29, Lk. 12:10) or the note in Mark 15:51-52 that “A certain young man was following [Jesus], wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.” I’m not sure just what that means or what to do with it.

Perhaps the hardest verses in the Bible to get our heads around aren’t the obscure verses, or those about the mark of Cain and the unforgivable sin, but the verses that we know the best. Or, as Mark Twain put it, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me; it is the parts I do understand.” With the exception of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world,” etc., perhaps no verses of the Bible are more well known than the Beatitudes, the first words of Jesus’ great sermon. The question we must ask, is which sermon? The great sermon that Jesus delivers in Matthew is called the Sermon on the Mount, whereas the one he delivers in Luke is called the Sermon on the Plain. (I don’t know why we call them sermons; neither Matthew nor Luke does. They are more like extensive lessons. Maybe Jesus’ PR people told him that they couldn’t sell “An Extended Discourse on Theological and Moral Matters with Eschatological Overtones and Hermeneutical Implications,” and that he should go with “Sermon on the Mount” instead.) Matthew remembers the sermon as being much longer than Luke does: Matthew’s

version contains nine blessings, Luke's only four, though he does match them up with four woes or warnings.

The words of Matthew's version are more familiar to us: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the peacemakers (Mt. 5:3ff.). Luke's words are similar, but different—more pointed and direct. In Luke Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor; blessed are you who are hungry now; blessed are you who weep now; blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man” (Lk. 6:20ff.). Leander Keck points out that “In Luke Jesus confronts and speaks specifically; in Matthew he consoles and speaks generally.” We—we preachers at least—tend to gravitate toward Matthew's version, with its well-rounded phrases, its spiritualizing of Luke's sharp-edged socio-economic realities. We like Jesus when he generalizes and comforts, avoiding specifics and harsh words of judgment.

But this is not Matthew's year to speak; it is Luke's, and he will not allow us to turn away from confronting head-on the realities of the world as we currently experience it and the new reality of God's kingdom as it invades and subverts that world. And so, Jesus says not, “blessed are the poor in spirit,” but “blessed are the poor.” Period. Now that's a mysterious saying if ever I heard one because it doesn't make sense. It doesn't square with the way we have been taught to understand or experience what it means to be blessed. “Blessed are the rich,” say *Fortune* magazine and the tabloid TV “news” shows. Blessed are the rich, for the world is their oyster—they can do pretty much whatever they darn well please and look good doing it and pay for the attorneys or the rehab to get them out of trouble. Yes, blessed are the rich.

Not so, says Jesus. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who in this country rely on welfare or sleep in homeless shelters. Blessed are the single parents working two jobs to pay the

bills. Blessed are the elderly and disabled who only just manage to pay for the medications they need by going without meals. Blessed are those in most of the world who struggle to earn more than two dollars a day, often laboring in hazardous or oppressive conditions. Blessed are the children who languish in under-funded and under-staffed orphanages from China to Romania to Nigeria. Blessed are the women, usually uneducated or abused, who endure exploitation in sexually-oriented businesses in order to survive. Blessed are the poor. You call that a blessing?

Jesus says not “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” but “blessed are you who are hungry now”—hungry for a decent meal that fills an empty stomach. Blessed are those who in this country clench grubby wads of food stamps at the checkout aisle or rely on food pantries or soup kitchens to insure they have enough to eat. Blessed are those who in many parts of the world subsist on a bowl of rice or meal, who thirst for water free of pollution and contaminants. Blessed are the six million children under age five who die every year as a result of hunger. Blessed are you who are hungry now. You call that a blessing?

Jesus says not “blessed are those who mourn,” but “blessed are you who weep now.” Blessed are the American families whose sons and daughters have died fighting in Iraq or who have died as a consequence of drug- or gang-related violence. Blessed are the women of Iraq whose husbands and children have died in the fighting in Iraq. Blessed are those who silently weep for spouses or children or friends too soon taken from the world. Blessed are you who weep now. You call that a blessing?

The one thing on which Matthew and Luke agree entirely is that Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, persecute you, and say all kinds of terrible and untrue things about you on my account.” Blessed are the martyrs of every age and land who have died for the sake of Jesus and his gospel, from St. Stephen to Liu

Fenggang, leader of a Chinese house church, recently released after three years in prison. Blessed are you when you suffer for the sake of Christ. You call that a blessing?

How exactly can Jesus pronounce blessed the poor, the hungry, the mournful and the oppressed? In what kind of upside-down world is Jesus living? Well, to be quite honest about it, it is our world that is upside-down. Our world, where the wealthiest one percent of the world's adults own 40 percent of its assets and the richest ten percent of adults control 85 percent of global wealth.¹ Our world, where 854 million people are hungry, meaning they cannot afford enough food to meet even minimal levels of nutrition.² Our world, where countless millions weep for the poverty, violence, disease, & death that afflict their lives. You call that a blessing?

Jesus can in fact call the poor, the hungry, the mournful and the oppressed blessed because he himself comes from God, who is the source of all blessing, to these very people. That is the reason we call it the Sermon on the Plain: Jesus doesn't stand above us, but with us, down on our level, in the flat places where most of the world lives. Jesus can pronounce blessing on the outcast and the marginalized in the present because he sees the present in light of God's future. In God's hands, the poor will not always be poor, nor those without food hungry, the mournful sad, or the oppressed maligned. Change was in the air. This was the good news of the kingdom of God, the good news that Jesus had announced in his hometown synagogue, the good news he made real as he healed the sick and cast out demons and taught the word of God.

It is important to see that the beatitudes are not pearls of wisdom or good advice or even moral imperatives. Barbara Brown Taylor points out that "In [the beatitudes] 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

¹ Aida Akl, "The Global Rich and Poor Gap Widens," January 24, 2007 at Voice of America News, <http://www.voanews.com/english/NewsAnalysis/GlobalRichandPoor2006-12-22-voa6.cfm>.

² Hunger Facts, Bread for the World, <http://www.bread.org/learn/hunger-basics/hunger-facts-international.html>.

them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be.”³ For some people that comes as good news, for others the news is not so good. True blessedness comes to those whom God has chosen to share in his salvation, thereby reversing all our customary evaluations, all our preconceived ideas about who is blessed. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the mournful, the oppressed because God is at work in Jesus Christ and in his church, working to change the world.

We can be a part of the way in which God is changing the world, transforming it on behalf of the poor, the hungry, and those who mourn. I want to talk about that next week, to share with you my own emerging vision of how we, the congregation of Cox Chapel, can be part of the way in which God is changing the world. And so I am going to ask you to do something that I don't recall ever asking you to do. I am asking that you pray for me, that I will have clarity of sight, and soundness of hearing, and boldness to share the vision. I ask that you pray for yourselves; to pray that God will open your heart and mind and spirit to the way his Spirit is guiding you to be a follower of Jesus Christ. If we will pray together and work together and worship together and serve together on behalf of the poor, the hungry, the mournful and the oppressed, I'd call that a blessing.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Ferris Wheel" in *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1999) 55.