

Both Luke and Matthew's Gospel share versions of the Beatitudes. In Matthew's Gospel, he softens or spiritualizes his language to "poor in spirit" instead of "poor" or "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" instead of "hungry." However, Luke keeps it "raw, terse, and close to the bone. There's no way around it: as far as Luke is concerned, God's blessings rest on those who have absolutely nothing to fall back on in this world. Nothing- no credit line, no nest egg, no fan base, no immunity" (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net)). In Matthew, Jesus is on a mountain when he gives the sermon, hence "Sermon on the Mount" and there offers nine blessings. While in Luke, Jesus comes down from a mountain after spending the night alone in prayer before choosing his twelve disciples and delivers his "Sermon on the Plain"- four blessings and four woes- from a large, level place. Before reading today's Gospel story in Luke, let us first pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in Luke **6:17-26. READ.**

In the Roman Empire, the world in which the Beatitudes were first preached, the richer and more powerful you were, the closer you were to the emperor at the top of the social hierarchy, the more blessed you were, and the more blessings you could (if you chose to) bestow on those beneath you. The 'blessed', the upper crust, lived above all the worries of normal existence. In this scenario, who needed God? I know this kind of empire is hard for us to imagine today but let's try. So when Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," he overturned the hierarchical structure of blessing. In God's empire, God gives gifts to *everyone*, but most especially to the vulnerable and those at the bottom of society"

(Diana Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings at the Cottage*). This is the in-our-face, hope-filled, faith-rattling declaration of Jesus' central teaching, a vision of a peaceable and just world- an upside down empire known as the realm of God. This is a dramatically different way of looking at the world though difficult for the church to fathom, and easy for it to neutralize- domesticating the radical pronouncement so that it comfortably fits many of us who comfortably fit its criteria. "It is unlikely that those who flocked around Jesus that day realized the cost of discipleship" (David L. Ostendorf, FOW). As Luke tells the story, Jesus came down from the mountain with his newbie disciples and stood "on a level place" (6:17), also called a plain. According to one scholar, "the word 'level' often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning. Jesus teaches the way of God's empire in the midst of the world as such a level place" (Ronald L. Allen, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

Standing in a broken level world from various places were a crowd of people who "had come to hear Jesus and to be healed of their diseases and cured of their unclean spirits" (6:18). Everyone was trying to touch Jesus, as power was literally coming out of him, healing all of them. We aren't told how many Jesus healed but then Jesus preaches to those gathered what discipleship looks like in God's empire. In a nutshell, Jesus says to the disciples and to us, "Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad and expendable and woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and popular. Yup, that's the fabulous Good News of the Kingdom of God- a world turned upside down. An economy of blessing that sounds

ludicrous. A reordering of priority and privilege that the Church will find awkward and even offensive for centuries to come” (Thomas). In other words, “Woe to you if the paradoxical truth of this blessing does not change your way of life” (*Connections*, Wes Avram, pp.250-251). I remember volunteering in a soup kitchen as a young adult and hearing the people served saying they were “blessed.” I was confused yet also humbled to hear that those who were hungry were blessed. My picture of blessed was wealth and health and happiness but that’s not what God means by blessing.

Today’s text is one that “comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.” Jesus is upping the ante on the cost of discipleship far beyond just “follow me.” Are you tempted to flip over to Matthew’s version or to edit Jesus’ words until you can tolerate them? Obviously, Jesus was exaggerating. Speaking figuratively.- that’s what we tell ourselves (Thomas). As always, I come with my privileged lens reading this text. Try as I may, I cannot romanticize, explain away, domesticate or ignore these words that are tripping me up. Maybe that is exactly what they are meant to do? Luke makes it clear, if we want to know where God’s heart is, we must look at the world’s most reviled, wretched, shamed, and desperate people.

Is this hard teaching from Jesus really meant to be moral instructions for us? No, I don’t think so. Let’s go back to the text. Look at what happens before Jesus gives the Sermon on the Plain. Jesus’ deeds set the context for his teaching. Jesus heals all of them. With the power of God,

he alleviates suffering in every possible way. Jesus' actions show "that he does not value misery for its own sake. Pain in and of itself is neither holy nor redemptive in the Christian story, and in fact, Jesus' ministry is all about healing, abundance, liberation, and joy" (Thomas). Also, Jesus' words aren't prescriptive. He isn't imposing rules on how to behave. As one scholar puts it, "this sermon is not advice at all. It's not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work" (*Home By Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor). Jesus warns with the woes that trusting external blessings as the foundation for our lives sets us up for great suffering and pain. This is when we most often can lose sight of God. "The blessings and woes deeply challenge us to ask ourselves- as disciples of Christ- who/what it is that we value and who/what it is that we reject" (*FOW*, Peter Eaton, p. 359). In other words, "the beatitudes do not tell us what to do. They tell us who we are, and more importantly, they tell us who Jesus is" (Taylor, p. 56).

Notice that Jesus delivers every blessing and every woe to every person gathered there on that level ground. "God is a God of both comfort and challenge, and in the divine economy, we are, all of us, on one level. Blessed and woeful. Saint and sinner. We occupy the plain of this beautiful and broken world together" (Thomas). We sometimes forget that though, don't we? "These wondrous yet stark words jar us out of faithful complacency" (Ostendorf). Hearing these leveling words echo from Jesus in my mind, I remember standing for the first time in the cemetery in Guatemala City twenty years ago. If you ever want to see how large the discrepancy is between the rich and the poor, you can go

as close as the encampment right down the road here or you can go to a developing country's cemetery. The poor are buried in high rise drawers- a little longer but no wider than a rubik's cube- rows of hundreds of drawers stacked on top of one another- while the rich are buried in what look like tiny houses (that are huge in comparison to the drawers)- one house per member of the family. At the edge of the cemetery... from a mountaintop, we looked down upon the city's dump, where the poor and hungry work and live...in the stinky, nasty trash. We literally looked down on them and watched them move around- they looked like ants. It was fairly easy to separate ourselves from them, as they were so far away. Some years later, I returned to the cemetery and again visited that mountaintop, overlooking the city's dump- except this time, the dump was much closer to the mountain on which we stood. It had become almost level with the city and thus harder to ignore the poor people, as you could almost make out their dirty faces. The sight and the smell was really uncomfortable. That night during our devotion time, there wasn't much laughing, as many of us wept telling stories of the days and how we had witnessed Christ in the faces of all those in need. There were feelings of guilt and helplessness swirling around us in that room- as well as feelings of conviction...of repentance for our own comfort and complacency. And we knew could feel God's power through the Holy Spirit in our midst. When asked why I took students to developing countries for mission trips when there's poverty in our own backyard, my answer was always the same. Sometimes we have to go to places where we're leveled- where we're made so uncomfortable that our eyes are opened in new

ways and we begin to see the people with needs in our own backyard. What if woes function in a similar fashion? What if they are more of a warning or caution- an opening of our eyes- a call to repentance from whatever blinds us from following Christ?

“This biblical story exposes our unconscious biases—how much our perspective has been decided by our society, our culture. Our implicit biases that have prescribed those in the valleys—those acceptable to look down upon. Those deemed less than” (workingpreacher.org, Karoline Lewis). Yes, Jesus’ vision of what discipleship in God’s empire looks like is hard to see and even more difficult to live. Jesus’ upside down kingdom- as Frederick Buechner reflects: is a kingdom “where the world says, ‘Mind your own business,’ and Jesus says, ‘There is no such thing as your own business.’ The world says, ‘Follow the wisest course and be a success,’ and Jesus says, ‘Follow me and be crucified.’ The world says, ‘Drive carefully- the life you save may be your own’- and Jesus says, ‘Whoever would save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.’ The world says, ‘Law and order,’ and Jesus says, ‘Love.’ The world says, ‘Get’ and Jesus says, ‘Give.’ In terms of the world’s sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks they can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.” This is not prosperity gospel- where you’re blessed if you have a family with 2.5 kids, a nice house with a picket fence, car, etc. No, this is not “blessing” as health, wealth, and happiness. “This is a teaching so costly, most of us will do anything to domesticate it. I like Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the woes: *But it’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you’ll ever get. And it’s*

*trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it. "There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them.*

Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Why? Because you have everything to look forward to. Because the kingdom of God is yours. Because Jesus came, and comes still, to fill the empty-handed with good things" (Thomas). I very much doubt that Hobby Lobby sells Luke's version of the Beatitudes- but maybe they should?! "May the God who offers comfort and challenge, grant us the grace to sit with woe, and learn the meaning of blessing" (Thomas) as we seek to follow Christ, who is turning this world upside down. Praise God from whom all blessings flow...Amen.