



"Blessings"
Luke 6:17-26
Steven Bohn
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Good morning! First, I want to say "thank you" to Jacqueline and the Session for allowing me the opportunity to speak before y'all this morning. I've gotten to preach a handful of times in my years and it's always an experience that is simultaneously scary, exciting and humbling, but I do enjoy the challenge of doing something a little different than hanging out with our young friends on a Sunday morning. And a challenge it has been – this is certainly the least "Everything is awesome, and God loves you" passage that I've ever preached from.

So here we are with the Sermon on the Plain. I'll admit that my initial reaction to realizing this was the passage I was 'assigned' to preach by the Lectionary was one of longing for the eight beatitudes that Matthew serves up from the more familiar Sermon on the Mount. After all, what preacher wouldn't want to deal with simply eight blessings vs the four blessings partnered with four woes that Luke recounts. I think all too often the church isn't sure what to do with this passage. We like to lean more into the relatable "poor in spirit" or "hungry for righteousness" that Matthew gives us while we do a fair amount of hemming and hawing at the probably less relatable and certainly blunter "blessed are the poor" and "blessed are the hungry" that we get from Luke.

And I'm definitely in the same boat as the church – this sermon has changed about a dozen times in content over the last couple of weeks. I've wrestled with if there was a softer angle to take, maybe one that wouldn't ruffle any feathers while I talk about parts like Jesus saying he isn't a fan of us chasing wealth. But Jesus is pretty clear in what he is and isn't saying here – and I ended up with this version of a sermon because honestly all I can really do is share what I hear from God through the Word. So, if your feathers in fact end up ruffled this morning, I urge you to take it up with Jesus.

Before we go further into what Jesus is saying here, it is important to first make note of a couple things – to whom Jesus delivers this message and how he does it. To the first point of *to whom* – notice that Jesus looks his disciples square in the eye before he starts in with blessings and woes. Jesus wasn't sharing condolences to the poor or sad among the crowd. He was telling his disciples, and by extension us followers in the church today, what God is and isn't about.

And to the point of *how* Jesus delivers this teaching – it seems to me no coincidence that Jesus comes down from the mountain to stand on a level place with everyone. As is often the case, Jesus teaches us how to live while standing beside us in the thick of it. All this to say that it seems to me an awful lot like Jesus is looking the church in the eye and saying, "It's time for us to get on the level."

So what does Jesus say as he levels with us? Well, for about the umpteenth time in the Gospels, Jesus spells out that the poor, the hungry, & the cast aside have God's attention. That God doesn't

define success by accumulated wealth or full and comfy stomachs; that God doesn't care about how cool or prestigious people think we are.

In my personal understanding of God, I rarely use "angry" or "wrathful" to describe our Creator. Though there are obviously many examples of God being both throughout Scripture, I can't stand the thought of a God that is anything other than an ultimate example of love. But even I, Mr. "God is Love", must admit that I think God is probably pretty angry right now. God is pretty furious when we live in and accept levels of income inequality that say that it's okay for the world's wealthiest 100 people to own more wealth than the entire bottom half of humanity, while almost one and a half billion people live in abject poverty with another three billion living on less than \$3 a day. I bet God is livid when we allow children to go to bed hungry while stores and restaurants throw away food by the dumpster-full. I have to guess God is steaming mad when we don't challenge systems that say it's okay for white folks to start our life journey on second base while people of color and other marginalized populations start off in the dugout. And God is probably pretty ticked off when we tiptoe around keeping this powerful truth of the Gospel silent because we're worried about what others might think or say about us.

God doesn't bless us because we've gathered superlatives from our peers. God doesn't bless us as we quietly ignore oppression and injustice out of fear of rocking the boat. God doesn't bless us when we support institutions that destroy creation. And God doesn't bless us when we sit around full and content.

And all that's probably a tough pill to swallow; I know it is for me. But as I read this passage over and over again in preparation for this sermon, I couldn't help but keep coming back to a feeling that Jesus was standing there beside me on the plain, grabbing me by the shirt collar and saying "Dude! All this brokenness that you put up with because you think you can't make a difference; all this injustice you tolerate because it's 'just the way things are'? God and I don't have time for that – get it together."

See, God has taken our understandings of how this all works and turned them upside down. Discipleship is more than just "God loves you!" and it's more than just "Follow me!" or "Do good and receive much." It's tossing everything worldly aside to make space for only God to be what fills us. Consider if you've ever been on a mission trip to a different part of our world or have heard from someone who has. What typically surprises us American Christians as we visit poorer areas of the world is how vibrant and conspicuous the faith is of say a family of five living in a one room metal hut with a dirt floor. I wonder if it's because we've fallen into the trap of the "prosperity gospel" that falsely preaches being a disciple of Christ is to be showered in material blessings. I know I'm often tempted to feel like the successes I've had in life are because I have made a career out of running after God in ministry. There's a lot of joy in what I do; a lot of joy! But Jesus says, at least to me, "Don't you dare pretend like your blessings aren't meant to be shared. Don't you dare." Christ instead redefines discipleship as requiring a level of sacrifice that is truly daunting.

And it really is daunting when you think of the big picture ... but we aren't going to be a people who throw up our hands and call it hopeless. Not today. I want us to think of how we might make a daily practical difference in our world.

Here's one idea: At the beginning of February, our adult education "Faith Matters" class watched a TheoEd talk (kinda like TED talks but with Jesus content; I encourage you to check them out on youtube) that featured the Rev. Dr Greg Ellison from the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. In

this talk, Greg shared with the audience and our class that we cannot simply define who we are in the negative. We cannot get wrapped up in comparing ourselves to other shining examples of activists or people who are tirelessly fighting for change. We must define who we are, where our passions, skills and gifts lie and then do the work we can do to affect change around us. Greg founded an organization called “Fearless Dialogues” which works to create spaces for folks to engage in hard conversations that help promote positive transformation in self and others. In his workshops with Fearless Dialogues, Greg uses a model that encourages people to positively affect the three feet around them. After all he says, “If we had a world filled with people all working to positively shape the three feet surrounding them, what good we could do.” I wonder if solving world hunger and dismantling systems of oppression is more possible than we think when it happens three feet at a time...

Some good news here, in the midst of some pretty tough challenges, is that Luke doesn’t tell us about a Jesus who sees those of us who get it wrong beyond redemption – after all the familiar story of the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus comes to us only from Luke’s Gospel. Hallelujah that Jesus offers redemption when we stray! But Jesus firmly calls us into a choice between two types of commitments each with their own unique consequence. One choice is running after what the world says is good ... and Jesus is quite clear of the consequence of that route. The other choice is to get out of our faithful complacency and live into God’s call - a direct, pressing mandate to turn everything we know upside down - to reorient relationships and work to reverse injustice in all the forms it takes.

Here’s another piece of good news – take a quick look back at the beginning of this passage. In the very first verse – “He came down with them ...” *With. Them.* We don’t go this alone. Christ knows he is calling us into a radically different way of doing things and friends don’t forget that He is here with us every step of the way – sharing radical love and providing us a radical example to follow. And we do this work in community with each other as well. While Jesus’ call feels deeply personal it is at the same time communal – all of us are given the same list of God’s priorities.

In closing, I want to share a little bit about a Q&A luncheon that I went to earlier this week. Our denomination’s Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson was the featured guest and speaker. He talked a little about a bunch of things - folks asked questions about the future of the church and where we’re headed, for his takes on some of the things the last General Assembly voted on, how we can be the church in the 21st century, and so on.

In some of his responses to these questions J. Herbert made a couple points that really struck me, so I am excited to share them with y’all: He said, “The church isn’t dying, we’re reforming.” (Amen) He asked us gathered educators and pastors if we were content to let the 21st century be one of society dragging the church towards justice work or if the church would stand up and live into our call to share radical love and promote needed change. And now y’all, I’m not typically a note-taker when I listen to speeches or lectures. I like to engage fully without the distraction of a phone or other note-taking device. But this last point made me sit up in my pew and pull the golf pencil and prayer request card from in front of me to jot his words down because they slapped me across my heart in the way that only the Spirit can: he shared, “It’s time for us to get up off our ‘blessed assurance’ and do the work.” Amen.

