

Plain Talk for Plain Folk

Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1, Luke 6:17-26

Jeremiah 17.5-10

Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Psalm 1 (adapted from Nan Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*)

Blessed are those who walk hand in hand with goodness,
Who stand beside virtue and sit in the seat of truth;

**for their delight is in the Spirit of Love,
and in Love's heart they dwell by day and by night.**

They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and flourish always;
in all that they do, they give life.

The unloving are not so,
They are like chaff blown away on the wind.

Cut off from wisdom, they know suffering and pain.

Love knows the way of truth
but the way of ignorance will perish.
**God's light breaks through hearts filled with illusion;
forgiveness is the way of God.**

GOSPEL READING Luke 6.17-26

So much has happened since the miraculous catch of fish, when Jesus started calling his disciples. He has infuriated the authorities by healing on the Sabbath and eating with "sinners." Now, of his many followers, he has chosen twelve to be "apostles," or "ones who are sent."

Today's text is Luke's version of the Beatitudes, most famous in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Luke's sermon takes place on the plain. How else are they different?

After a night of prayer on the mountain, Jesus came down with the twelve and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"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 you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and 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; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”



Compared with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, as told in Matthew, Luke’s Sermon on the Plain is just that: plain talk for plain folk. As we’ve already seen, Luke is fond of talking about reversals in the human condition: the poor become rich, the hungry are fed, the powerless are lifted up. The captives are freed. This is Luke’s great project, and here it is again. The downtrodden triumph, the rich and powerful are brought down..

Where Matthew’s Jesus talks in general: “Blessed are the meek,” Luke’s Jesus speaks directly: “Blessed are *you* who are hungry, blessed are *you* who weep.” Matthew is spiritual: “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Luke just says, “Blessed are you who are poor.” Literally, “No money, no nothing.” And then, of course, Luke adds the scary “woes” which Matthew leaves out entirely. But maybe the biggest difference of all is how Luke adds the word “now.” “Blessed are you who are hungry NOW; but woe to you who are filled NOW. Blessed are you when you weep NOW, but woe to you who are laughing NOW.”

Does this mean that life is like a Ferris wheel world that will bring the high low and the low high and set everything right by tomorrow? Now it’s one thing, but it will change! As we used to say in Chicago, “If you don’t like the weather, wait 15 minutes.” Or, as the spiritual teacher James Finley said, his own spiritual teacher, Thomas Merton, used to ask him, “How are you feeling today, Jim?” “Kind of down,” he’d answer. “Don’t worry,” Merton would say. “You’ll feel better tomorrow.” Or if Jim said, “I’m feeling really happy,” Merton would respond, “That’s OK. Tomorrow you’ll be back in the dumps.” It’s like what my sister calls her 24-hour manic depressive cycle. We all have them sometimes!

So here’s my question for you: Is Luke’s plain talk for plain folk really plain to you? Is it a manifesto for social justice? Get out there and change the world? Or is it a manual for acceptance of what is, a caution to wait for better days, which are bound to come eventually?

This is an honest question: what do you think? And even more significantly, what will you do?

When in doubt, they say, pray. So let’s pray some words, and then listen to some silence: God, our God, God of all our days, and of all days, and of all people. What are you trying to tell us? And what do you expect of us? Show us. We are asking. We are listening. We are waiting. Amen.

First let me tell you, I don’t have the answers to the questions. I’m not even sure I have the right questions.

But let me tell you a story. Back when I was a hospice chaplain, I used to visit a patient named Curtis. One day he took a bad fall. He was bruised all over, had a huge bloody gash on his forehead, scrapes on his knees. Over the course of the next month, Curtis lost weight, slept more, spoke less, drifted. All indicators said Curtis was

slowly dying. At the same time, his bruises faded, his abrasions healed, the gash on his forehead closed and was covered over with new pink skin. Do you see what was happening? Even as Curtis's life was ebbing away, his body was healing itself. People find comfort in hospice when there is no longer hope for an earthly cure; and yet healing of all kinds can happen. During this time, Curtis's daughter visited. They had been estranged for decades. I didn't listen in on that meeting, but I think her last words to him were something like this: "Dad, I forgive you. I'm sorry I waited so long to come back. Please forgive me. I love you. Thank you for being my father." They cried together. Soul healing happened. Dying happened, too. And after death, Curtis was finally cured completely, body and soul. Or so I believe. What do you think?

Read today's lesson backwards, from the bottom up: start with the very last bit about the prophets. "Woe to you when people speak well of you; that's how they treated the false prophets" But remember two weeks ago in Nazareth, when Jesus preached a sermon of social justice a lot like this one? At first, "they all spoke well of him." Read backward today and find the opposite, "Blessed are you when people persecute you. That's how they treated the prophets before you." Back in Nazareth, first they praised Jesus, then they decided to kill him. Is he establishing his prophetic credentials? Earlier still in today's lesson, they flock to him from all over the country, from a hundred miles away, to be cured and to be healed. And power goes out from him.



Now read back to the very beginning, to the first words in the text: "After a night of prayer on the mountain, Jesus came down and stood on a level place..."

Jesus' work begins in prayer. Prayer so deep we can hardly imagine it, prayer so powerful we hardly dare to go there. This is my judgment of myself; you can decide whether it applies to you. Most of the time my prayer skims the surface. Touches on the worries of today. It's colored by the mood of the moment: a bright, sunny day; the last appalling thing I heard on the evening news, or the good results of a biopsy or a covid test. Today I might be cheering for my team, tomorrow cursing them for losing.

But true prayer, which is our life in God, is more than day to day ups and downs. It's more like climate than weather. The great Russian writer Anton Chekhov said, "Any idiot can face a crisis — it's day to day living that wears you out." When covid first manifested, there was panic, but there was also gearing up for the challenge: "We can do this!" As the months have worn into years, we have grown weary, too. How much longer must we mask our faces, or wonder who'll even show up for work tomorrow? Should I fly as planned or just stay home? Will we ever meet in person again? We've seen more of society's inequities exposed, and a cure seems farther away than ever. The day to day has worn us down, and continues to wear us down.

So what do we do? In the midst of this strange climate, are we still supposed to go with the social justice manifesto and act now to reverse the world order, right the wrongs, champion the worthy causes, bring about change? Or do we lie low and keep quiet until the wheel of life turns again? What do you think? How do you feel?

These are the times when we need to read Scripture next to Scripture and let the Bible interpret the Bible. Go back to the Old Testament readings for today. Jeremiah and the psalmist speak with one voice: They are saying, send your roots deep into God, immerse yourself in prayer. Plant yourself firmly by the river of the Spirit of

love; it may go underground but it never stops flowing, and where it flows, healing happens. Open your heart to love, where all life is born. Then you will not doubt, then you will not be afraid. When drought comes you will still be full of life.

Then your life will bear fruit according to your own nature, and you will reach out to others according to what is finest and most holy in you. That's why Paul could say, "Even though our outward nature is wasting away, our inner nature is renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16) God's work of healing is happening in you as it was in my hospice patient Curtis. In the midst of death, we are still in life, in God, in love. If death seems to outrun healing, it's only because the final cure awaits you in eternity.



So what about Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. We're just plain people, looking for a plain answer. Is it a social justice manifesto? Or a manual for quiet acceptance? Listen: You can't accomplish everything but to do nothing denies the power of God's Spirit in you. Listen. You can't ever do it all, but you can always do something. You can't cure everything wrong with this old world, but you can help it heal. Seek the source, be rooted in love. Move in the power of the Spirit. Let the Spirit's power move in you and fill you. The world is fickle. Human desires distract us; daily living on the surface wears us down. Only God is constant and sure. Blessed are you who trust in the Beloved; blessed are you when your trust is Love. Amen

Prayers:

You will notice another change in the Lord's Prayer. I know the words are sacred to many of us, and we will return to the traditional form at some point. But sometimes I think they grow so familiar we stop hearing them. If you are more comfortable saying the old words, please do so, but if you would like to try a new path to the heart of God - who is bigger than just "Father" and whose influence is greater than a mere "king-dom", feel free to try these as written.

God of grace, you have raised us up from death to life. When we are weak you are strong. Give us deep trust in your grace, and send us out as hollow, fragile vessels of your inextinguishable grace; to be light in the darkness and healing in the hurt, to be among the poor and powerless with hope and courage; to love at all costs, knowing our life is in you alone.

We pray for all whose roots are threatened: those who have no permanent homes, those who have left their homes because of domestic violence or wars, those whose homes are threatened or who are facing eviction. We thank you for our new friends at Gage East, where people without homes are able to put down roots. Help us remember that blessings are both spiritual and practical; help us to bless others as you have blessed us.

Remember us all in your kingdom and teach us to pray: Heart of heavenly Love, hallowed be your name. Your harmony come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And let us not be led into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for the peace, the potential, and the praise are yours, now and forever. Amen.