

Today friends, I believe the Gospel speaks for itself.

For years I have joked, especially when stymied by a particular passage of scripture that I would stand in the pulpit and say just that and sit down. It was fun to say and I hope that I have gotten it out of my system. Perhaps as much as any passage of scripture this one from Luke can be thought to speak for itself. Of course, we should all be frightened if it does.

Compared to the Sermon on the Mount in The Gospel of Matthew, Luke's Sermon on the Plain can feel stark and more condemning than comforting. First of all Matthew's Beatitudes are somewhat enigmatic such as "Blessed are the poor in spirit" or "Blessed are the meek." We might discuss what it means to be poor in spirit or meek, but there is no question what it means to be poor or hungry. Matthew's blessings are the sorts of passages that scholars and lay people alike enjoy pondering. They challenge our intellect and keep us safe from our hearts; the place where we are challenged by Luke's list.

In Matthew's Beatitudes everyone gets a blessing; we must determine which one is ours. If we are not sure we can pick one and work on it. Perhaps I can take a course on dispute mediation and be a peacemaker. Or we can flip it around and find the payoff we like and aim to get it.

In contrast Luke gives us blessings and woes in pairs. The categories hit us exactly where we live. Starting with the very first pair we realize we are not in Matthew anymore. Luke reports that Jesus blesses the poor and gives woes to the rich. While most of Jesus' listeners were impoverished, we are not. The poor are getting heaven and all you and I get is woe. The next one tells us that those who are hungry will be filled, while you and I are going to go hungry. The next one is a little less condemning for I know that there are those in this congregation that mourn and look forward to the day when laughter is more plentiful. I doubt there is anyone in this room who is so callous, heartless or indifferent that the world is nothing but a source of amusement and suffering is a joke.

The last pair of Luke's beatitudes sounds the most like Matthew. Here Jesus says that we are blessed when "people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." But very few of us have actually had to endure hatred, exclusion, defamation, or revilement for our faith. Sadly, it is often those in this country who are not Christian who endure hatred, exclusion, defamation, or revilement. We are more likely to have people speak well of us. When they do, beware of getting puffed up, for it is likely that we have conformed to society's expectations instead of God's.

By this time in our examination of this passage you and I might feel doomed to woe because of the circumstances of our birth. Perhaps, we can feel mournful about this judgement laid upon us. We are so well off perhaps we should mourn our good fortune and thereby be blessed. While that circular reasoning may work for you, I do not think that was Luke's or Jesus' point.

Regardless of whether Jesus said the Matthew version or the Lukan version of the Beatitudes there is something more at work in both sets of them than a literal reading reveals. Throughout the gospels when Jesus blesses someone he does not do so at the expense of another. He certainly gets perturbed with the religious elites and

those who lack empathy. Numerous times he calls out such people; often pointing out that it is the outsider—the Samaritan, the Roman soldier, the prostitute, the tax collector—who is more devout. However, he does not then pronounce eternal damnation upon elites or Jewish citizens. He points out their error in the hopes that they will repent and return to the ways of the Lord.

Rather than condemnation what Jesus is using in his sermon in Luke is a rhetorical device to get our attention. It is one I think he often uses—hyperbole. The hyperbole gets our attention and unsettles us. This gets us to look at our lives and see how we might move out of the woe category and into the blessed.

For example, we who have much to eat can share with the hungry, maybe we the full can lessen our affliction by feeding others. If the poor are blessed and the rich are condemned then we can who have much can share with the poor. We can comfort the mourner and help them to laugh again. We can support rather than revile those who do God's work

But as God said to Jeremiah, “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?”¹ Yes, we have the capacity to turn things inside out and upside down for our own purposes. We make the poor and the hungry the enemy. We search to find the one person who abuses our trust and make them the reason to deny kindness and justice to everyone. Jesus admonishes us not to judge² that is God's prerogative. Instead we are called to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.³

If we can find it in our hearts to do those three things, we are on the way from woeful to blessed. God does not expect perfection for God knows the challenges we face. I think God desires from us, above all else, what Thomas Merton prayed. It is a prayer that brings me solace as I try and fail and try again only to fail again. I hope it will bring you solace, too.

Merton wrote, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”⁴

¹ Jeremiah 17:9-10 NRSV

² Luke 6:37

³ Micah 6:8 NRSV

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* ©1956