

Luke 6:17-26 Luke's Blessings
2/17/2019

More often than not, when people think of the Beatitudes, they think of the way The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel begins, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Luke has a different take on things and today is the day to hear about it.

First of all, in Luke's version the message is delivered from a "level" place which is the reason some refer to these words as, "The Sermon on the Plain," and like it's counterpart in Matthew, it begins with a version of the Beatitudes.

One can readily hear the difference in emphasis between the two gospels. Matthew's, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, the peacemakers," appears in Luke as, "Blessed are the poor; those who hunger and thirst now, those who weep now, those who are hated, excluded, insulted, and rejected as evil because of the Son of Man."

Matthew seems to have a partiality to the ones who through spiritual graces have come to qualities like humility and meekness, and just a breathtakingly powerful sense of almost innate goodness; where Luke is focused more clearly on what is physically present, actual hunger and thirst, sorrow, etc.

What is the meaning of this difference between poverty in spirit, and just plain poverty? Luke confronts us with the idea that God prefers the poor; or more simply, that poverty has a life-giving power in a person's life, while affluence diminishes life. "Power corrupts," as the saying goes, and so does wealth. Does poverty enliven, and hallow?

My Partiality

Now and again honesty is required, so I confess, I am partial to riches, if not on a grand scale, then at least a level that leaves me warm and safe and dry . . . , and fed. And when I awake in the morning I would much rather laugh, and when laughter comes, it is always a good day. And I have to admit, a well-spoken compliment is preferred over an insult, which brings a sickly feeling to the stomach, raises the anxiety level.

So it is particularly troublesome to learn that I should rejoice and leap for joy (although leaping is less a part of the equation these days, it would be more like stepping in a hole) when hunger and tears and persecution comes. Jesus says we are blessed when these things happen. He speaks woes upon those who are fed now, who laugh now, and who are respected now. What do these blessings and woes mean?

What It Is Not

First, let me say what they do not mean. The whole Gospel of Luke presents us with a perspective that is

meant to get us to think again about what is important in life. It is a mistake, however, to take these words so literally as to conclude that people who have suffered the most in this life are the happiest; and the poorest are all well-adjusted and healthy and invulnerable to the affects of sin.

And do not let it make you feel guilty when life brings you some blessing, a feeling of security and peace, even if only temporarily; or a level of affluence that allows you to enjoy some of life's benefits, some beauty or grace.

Nor should we be automatically prejudiced against the rich, as if they are somehow unredeemable or corrupted in a way that leaves them incapable of any kind of virtue; love, courage, empathy, compassion, or kindness.

History and experience make some sense out of the general idea that wealth and power do have a corrupting influence while suffering has, if not a hallowing affect, at least a character-building one. But this idea is not absolute and there are many exceptions to the rule on both sides.

There are many examples of people who come to resentment and hatred because of their suffering, which destroys their humanity. Poor people can sin too. And conversely, there are the St. Anthony's of the world who have given away billions and funded research that has improved the lives of millions of people and have been characterized as

“humanitarians,” maybe not perfectly, but indisputably nonetheless. We must look for an answer to our question in some other way.

Reversal

“The first shall be last and the last shall be first,” Jesus has said. And when Paul comments on this reversal in First Corinthians, he speaks of the folly and scandal of proclaiming a crucified Christ. He says, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world, and the despised things, the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are.”

I am reminded of the toast at the end of the classic Christmas movie, “It’s A Wonderful Life,” when Harry Bailey salutes his brother with these words, “To my big brother George, the richest man in town,” when what he was clearly rich with was not money at all, but friends who loved him.

There is a great reversal in scripture that is exemplified in the 118th Psalm and quoted extensively in the New Testament; “the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” The chief stone is the one that sets all the others in their place and supports them. And we are told it had been rejected by the people, who have made a value judgement that has turned out to be all wrong.

Value

Think for a moment or two about the common way of assessing value in our consumeristic world. We place value on people and things with dollar signs. I am not sure there is any way for us to circumvent this way of placing value. But we simply must face that it is not God's way. In God's way of placing value, the way of the world is turned upside-down, or it seems like it.

In a sense, God's way of placing value strips us bare. It dismisses the trappings of poverty and affluence so that we appear more or less as we are, not more, not less valuable than any other. In God's way of seeing things, what we often see as the dressings of success and power simply don't mean anything.

That is closer to the truth of what Jesus is saying in these Lukan Beatitudes than to say that he is glorifying poverty or condemning wealth. He is challenging his disciples to see themselves and others differently, not in terms of what kind of job they have or clothes they wear or houses and cars, and all that, but in the fullest and truest sense of their humanity.

Monetary words do not work well in this kingdom sense, though sometimes even Jesus uses financial examples to try and prove his point (such as the Parable of the Talents, or of the Unjust Steward). Instead, the words that make the most sense of the kingdom ethic, God's way of placing value on things, comes from the realm of relationships. The most notorious of these kingdom words is "love." And that

explains what comes next in Luke's version of Jesus' stump sermon; "Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you."

Love and all its companion words; kindness, compassion, goodness, friendship, forgiveness, honor, dignity, integrity, and words like that; are set next to the language of hate and all its companion words; envy, jealousy, greed, betrayal, dishonesty, malice, and words like that.

All of these words we only know from the context of human beings encountering one another. What Jesus is saying is that in that context everyone is precious. The ones who are most despised are thus lifted up; and in a way those most admired, the beautiful, the talented, the rich, well, are brought low.

But now something beautiful is envisioned, something so beautiful that it is hard to catch and describe; a setting in which everyone, *or at least all those who are willing, even those who see each other as enemies*, can laugh and cry together, can celebrate and mourn together, can forgive and be forgiven together. Are you willing?

We sometimes speak of accepting Christ, of inviting Christ into our hearts. Sometimes we forget the full meaning of this acceptance, this invitation; it means we are willing to take part in this different kind of kingdom everything is turned on its head, where those who were at one time enemies, because of Christ, have become friends.

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