

Sermon for Sunday, November 6, 2016

Choosing Unity

Both Matthew and Luke contain what's known as The Beattitudes or blessings, but it's Matthews text that tends to be read, studied and committed to memory: you probably know some of them, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Matthew offers 9 Beattitudes, where as Luke gives us four blessings and four Woe statements. And unlike Matthew's version, Luke's text takes a concrete, almost in your face kind of approach: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

This is not as kind and fluffy as Matthews version, and I think sometimes there's a desire to just skip past Luke's text.

But there's good news, if we're willing to listen...Because it's here that Jesus lays out his vision for the kingdom of God-and how those who say yes to being his disciple are called into action.

In order to understand what's happening, we have to go back, just a few verses and look at the whole story.

In Luke 6.12-16-Jesus went up on a mountain with all of his disciples. At that point there were more than 12 disciples—we don't know how many there were exactly but it says that Jesus spent all night in prayer and in the morning he called his disciples and chose 12 of them, and gave them the name "Apostles".

After appointing the twelve, Jesus and the disciples went down the mountain where they were met by a huge crowd.

Apparently word had spread about this traveling Rabbi. A Rabbi who had been teaching in synagogues throughout Galilee—who during his stay in Capernaum, spent the whole night healing the sick and casting out demons. Stories of his miraculous powers had spread far and wide...so people from miles around came with an expectation—Luke 6.18-19 says that "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."

The story paints almost a frantic picture of this crowd, a mass of people, so desperate to be healed, that they were pushing and doing everything they could to touch Jesus.

I kind of like to think of a Taylor Swift situation when imagining this scene—imagine what would happen if Taylor Swift suddenly showed up in a school cafeteria-can you imagine how quickly students (and more than a few staff) would swarm her? How people would desperately push and shove, wanting her autograph? That's the kind of mayhem going on in this story—Jesus had a rock star quality...

And it's while he's in the middle of the clamoring crowd that Luke says "Jesus 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.”

It’s like I can hear Matthew, the tax collector, leaning over to John, saying “um, did he just say ‘blessed are the poor, and what’s with the whole “Blessed are you when people hate you??””...

Not only that but Jesus wasn’t done: 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.”

Putting these blessings and woes together seems a bit strange—but they make sense when we consider the crowd.

During Jesus time, illness often cut people off from participating in society—Leper’s were cast out of communities, estranged from their families they were forced to live outside of cities in Leper colonies. And people afflicted with epilepsy were misunderstood and thought to be possessed by demons—many in the crowd that surrounded Jesus had probably been to countless doctors and maybe even priests, hoping that something, anything would free them from their illness and allow them to return to their friends and family.

It’s in the midst of that crowd that Jesus speaks the words: Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who know that you have nothing—for yours is the kingdom of God.

The people had come with empty hands- whether they were monetarily poor or poor in spirit-they trusted that the source of their healing and wholeness was right in front of them in the person of Christ.

The amazing thing is that their trust wasn’t misplaced. As they reached out, they found what they were looking for--God was in the flesh—the people society had pushed out, were being welcomed into God’s kingdom. Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

However, Jesus also flips this statement on it’s head; “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”

This statement asks a question: Where do we find consolation or comfort?

We all have big and small ways for finding things that provide us with comfort.

I’ll never forget, one year when I was out holiday shopping, I was walking into Best Buy and on the front of their doors were pictures—and one that caught my attention was of a laptop with the words: imagine you, happier.

Happiness, was just a purchase away.

In fact there’s another term for this: retail therapy. It’s real...

In 2015 Forbes Magazine published an article titled: “Retail Therapy: Does it Help?” In it the author cites a report from the Journal of Consumer Psychology which found that “retail therapy not only makes people happier immediately, but it can also fight lingering sadness or [stress](#). Researchers noted that many people who are sad or scared feel like they have no control over their environments. For them, shopping is a logical coping mechanism.”

When Jesus talks about “the rich”, there’s no dollar amount that defines what being “rich” means or looks like. But I think we can say, that rich means, we have enough to buy consolation—to comfort ourselves—but more than that, being rich means that we have enough to make ourselves believe that we can make it on our own. Our source of healing is within our reach and buried in our next purchase.

But the truth is, while this might all work in the short term, it doesn’t really work in the long term. Because when we peel back the layers, we see that what we are really after isn’t something we can buy. It doesn’t come with a price tag. What we really want is to be put back together—to find healing and be restored to who we truly are.

What if being poor, means that we understand that the stuff we buy and everything we own, can’t actually make us happy or heal our deepest wounds?

What if being hungry now, means believing that the true source of life and the one thing that will actually feed us, is the bread of life?

What if weeping now, means that we walk through this world, willing to see the actions and events happening all around us which break God’s heart, and allow our hearts to break as well?

What if being hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed, means being willing to stand and speak-to bear witness to God’s presence in the world, and to lift up the voices of the marginalized in our society?

In this text Jesus casts a vision for what God’s kingdom looks like—and it looks like this table;

A table where everyone is welcome; regardless of social or economic standing—regardless of where we’ve been or even where we are—even regardless of political party—this table is the great equalizer, where we remember that the only prerequisite for receiving this meal is acknowledging that our true comfort, in life and in death, is Jesus Christ. Everything else takes a back seat, because Christ is the bread of life and our source of healing.

But it doesn’t stop here...As Christ’s disciples we are called to go from this table and welcome others into God’s kingdom. And sometimes that means, loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us—because through our words and actions we can help reveal God’s kingdom here and now...

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

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