

Pentecost 21, Year C,

3rd November, 2019

Ephesians 1:11-23 NIV / Luke 6:20-31 NRSV

The Beatitudes are something most of us have encountered,

or are familiar with in our encounters with scripture in our lifetimes.

Most of us have heard

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,

blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

blessed are those who mourn, etc.

Yet I would wager that across the board,

when we think of the Beatitudes, we are thinking of Matthew chapter 5,

not Luke chapter 6.

We are used to associating those platitudes

with the Sermon on the Mount,

not the Sermon on the Plain

that we are presented with in today's gospel lesson,

As is so often the case, multiple synoptic gospel writers,

ie the writers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke,

relate the same basic story of Jesus' life,

presenting it just a little differently than their fellow gospel writers.

Too often though, we just chalk it up to differences in style,

make the assumption that they are basically saying the same thing,
and move along to another passage, or even worse,
try to reconcile them to make some hybrid whole
that melds the two.

Unfortunately, when we try to make the bible all fit together smoothly,
we often miss out on valuable differences
that can relate entirely different perspectives
which often portray different facets of Jesus' teachings,
and can render those teachings less valuable and insightful.

These two stories are a prime example.

We may be tempted to say that they both involve Jesus teaching a large crowd
with sayings that are very similar.

But that's really the only commonalities between these two stories.

To begin with, the settings are very different and reflect different perspectives.

In the story in Matthew,
Jesus ascends a hill overlooking the sea of Galilee
with the audience below him.

In our story today, he does the opposite.

After going up the mountain to pray and naming his disciples,
he descends to a great plain,
and begins teaching on the same level

as the crowd around him.

While our initial impression may be that just reflects the writer's depiction of the setting, it can relay quite different perspectives.

In Matthew, there is a sense of Jesus teaching from on high, emphasizing his divinity, looking down on the crowd, and causing them to gaze up at him.

If I am looking up at Jesus above me, as Moses on a mountaintop, between earth and heaven,
I will see the Beatitudes as a higher law,
a covenant with a community to which I aspire to belong.

Even the wording of the lesson in Matthew
reflects this feeling of Jesus revealing lofty aspirations
for the crowd to work toward achieving as long term goals:

"blessed are the poor

'in spirit',

for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven...

blessed are those who hunger and thirst
'for righteousness',

for they will be filled...

blessed are those that mourn,
for they will be comforted."

He wraps up the section by saying,

“Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.”

Jesus appears to be setting faith goals for the crowd;

noble qualities to aspire to.

By contrast, his teaching is a bit different in Luke.

He sets forth the individual Beatitudes with slight differences,

but then matches them with admonishments

for those on the opposite end of the spectrum:

“Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kin-dom of God...

but woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation;”

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled...

but woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry;”

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh...

woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.”

If I am looking at Jesus on my level, with Jesus looking up at me

because he has knelt down to touch and heal someone who is sick or lame,

the Beatitudes appear to be immediate, everyday,

inseparable from the joys and sufferings of life.

The blessed are just poor and hungry.

I cannot look past them and see something loftier.

Jesus is right there, blocking my view.

No pure in heart on the Sermon on the Plain.

This is a gospel for hard living,
in the down and dirty mess of kids without food,
dead husbands,
and a broken leg that won't let me walk to till my field,
or carry water back from the well.

What a difference perspective makes.

In Matthew, I sense Jesus looking down,
inviting me to come up and see the big picture -
a new covenant community of pure hearts
and hunger for righteousness.

In Luke, I sense Jesus looking up at me, as if to say,
what are you doing this very minute?
People are sick and dying right here, tormented by spirits.
They have come from all over the land; will you get down here and help?

Luke make clear that the Beatitudes are not about righteousness in general.

The Beatitudes are not only about our aspirations to godliness.
They are also about a community of disciples standing
with the grieving, the poor, and the hungry of the land as Jesus does.
They are about practicing the presence of Jesus
through acts of care and compassion.

Luke insists that the Christian life begins just as much with the ministry,
as with belief.

Luke asks us to follow Jesus into the crowd,
to learn about him not from scrutinizing his teachings
for every word of higher law and eternal truth,
but from working alongside him.

Luke summons Christians to begin with practice,
to learn Christ's way by doing.

Too often we are tempted to follow the age old Protestant practice
of struggling to find the perfect, correct doctrine to follow
and striving to embody the perfect character.

We preach, cajole, admonish, reprimand, and argue over words,
trying to win the perfect biblical interpretation prize,
struggling to get it right,
that we end up making the Beatitudes solely about us.

Luke will not let us settle for that.

Just act, just serve, just help, and faith will follow.

You do not have to know already what can be learned only by serving.

That is why we almost always discover that
whether we are dishing out the potatoes at a soup kitchen,
visiting someone who is ill at home or in the hospital,

or helping out a family down on their luck,
we usually find that we are being ministered to far more
than we are ministering to others.
Often our own need for transformation is most obvious
when we are with people we thought were the needy ones.

When we think we are taking Jesus to those in need,

we find he is already there ahead of us.

It can be a blessed relief to know we aren't responsible
for bringing Jesus along much less explaining him;
only for following him into the crowd.

The Jesus looking up at us in Luke seems to already know

that we who have enough prefer to avoid the poor,
because they can remind many of us how close we are
to the edge of want.

Jesus on his knees with a paralyzed man seems already to know

that our own fears of illness and death keep us at arm's length from the sick.

Jesus inviting us to join him seems to already know that we -

our lives, our faith, our being with God -

will be transformed in the dust of the plain.

So are we ready to join Jesus on the dusty plain, to step onto that field with him?

If not, what is holding us back?

Is it discomfort with the unfamiliar,
with the thought of stepping into unknown territory?
After all it's much more comfortable and familiar
to sit here in comfortable surroundings,
with people we've known for years,
and ponder faith
than to step through those doors into the unknown.

Yet are we really finding Jesus in this dusty big room?

Don't get me wrong.

Our time of worship has value of its own,
as do the loft aspirations of Matthew,
but following Christ means just that, following him.

Getting up and letting ourselves be led into the crowd

to be the ministering disciples we are called to be.

How can we reach out to those who hunger and thirst,
to those who are sick and sad?

Jesus came down the mountain.

On a level plain, in the field, he blessed the tumultuous crowd.

His words were for those real and hurting people,
the actual hungry and poor of his time.

That is why if we stand with those in need, the grieving, and the sick,

we might, just might, have a chance to see Jesus ourselves.

Because that is always where he can be found, where there's work to be done.

Dusty old buildings were not his usual hangouts.

I hope and pray that we make our own commitments to head out into the field,

and find Jesus where he's at work,

showing us what discipleship really means,

what a living faith really means. Amen.