

Plain Speaking

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Isaiah 55:6:11 (Good News Translation)⁶ Turn to the LORD and pray to him, now that he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked leave their way of life and change their way of thinking. Let them turn to the LORD, our God; he is merciful and quick to forgive. ⁸ “My thoughts,” says the LORD, “are not like yours, and my ways are different from yours. ⁹ As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours. ¹⁰ “My word is like the snow and the rain that come down from the sky to water the earth. They make the crops grow and provide seed for planting and food to eat. ¹¹ So also will be the word that I speak – it will not fail to do what I plan for it; it will do everything I send it to do.
- Luke 6:17-26 (New International Version) ¹⁷ He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, ¹⁹ and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. ²⁰ Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²² Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. ²³ “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. ²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. ²⁵ Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶ Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus startles our complacency in calling us to dedicate our lives to serving God’s will.

Having just read or heard that gospel reading, we may be thinking, “I’m not sure I heard that clearly. It sounded familiar... but it wasn’t right. Something was different.”

And you’d be correct. It did sound familiar, and something was different.

That passage from Luke Chapter 6 sounded familiar because it reminds you of a similar passage in Chapter 5 of Matthew’s gospel. There in Matthew what we know as the “Sermon on the Mount” begins with Jesus pronouncing a series of proverb-like sayings that we call The Beatitudes. (They get that name “beatitudes” because of the first word of each saying as translated in Latin.) We’re used to hearing “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven..., Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...,” etc.

In the way he presents those sayings of Jesus Matthew seems to spiritualize them, make them somewhat uplifting. But Luke’s version that we just heard is a little different. First of all, Jesus is not on a mountain. He’s just come down from one and is standing in a large flat area – hence Luke’s version of the beatitudes has the nickname the “Sermon on the Plain.”

Another difference between Matthew’s presentation and Luke’s is that the Lukan version of the beatitudes is personal. Blunt. Perhaps a bit off-putting. For example,

In Matthew, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” In Luke, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor.” In Matthew, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” In Luke, he says, “Blessed are you who hunger now.” That’s a significant difference. It’s much easier for us to accept “Blessed are the poor in spirit” than to accept “Blessed are you who are poor.” We see poverty as a curse, not a blessing. It’s much easier for us to accept “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” than to accept “Blessed are you who hunger now.” We know something about blessings, and we know that poverty or hunger are not blessings.¹

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Another difference is that in Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus utters nine statements of blessing. In Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" he offers only four. What's more, in Luke's presentation Jesus follows those four beatitudes with four statements of woe: "Woe [to you] if you're rich... Woe if your belly's full... Woe if your life's cruising along... Woe if you're popular...." Just when you thought Jesus was painting a hopeful future, he brings down the crowd.

From a preacher's perspective here's the irony: you may be sitting there hoping I can take Luke's awkward, challenging versions of these statements by Jesus and expound on them in a way that somehow makes them more palatable.

But what if the discomfort they stir within us is precisely what Jesus intended?

Why would he do that? Why would Jesus intentionally disturb us, make us feel awkward? Well, "Luke's version may be closer to that which Jesus really said. Jesus didn't come to teach us what we could easily accept. Jesus came to turn our world and its values upside down."²

Let's be honest: we become so accustomed to the comfort of the way things are that we may be complacent. We may forget that for many, many people, the world's violence, neglect, greed, and intolerance inflict pain and exacerbate struggle. And if *we're* not suffering, we may not take notice of the way others are suffering. That can be how we go through our days – seeing the world from the perspective of "I'm okay and that's what matters." That is so "human" of us – but that's not how God rolls.

The prophet Isaiah expressed the dramatic difference between God's insight into our world and our understanding of our own situation. You probably recognize these words from Isaiah Chapter 55 where the prophet wrote

"My thoughts," says the Lord, "are not like yours,
and my ways are different from yours.
As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are my ways and thoughts above yours."³

So let's accept that Jesus was intentional in speaking those blunt blessings and worrisome woes. He wanted to catch our attention, perhaps. Maybe Jesus intended to startle us. To instill empathy for those around us who feel the pressures and stigmas society places upon them. Jesus' bluntness was meant to inspire us to take action to protect and empower those individuals and groups who are vulnerable or powerless or impoverished or marginalized or simply overlooked and ignored.

Now, we certainly appreciate the world we live in; we're grateful for the blessings and opportunities we have received. But because we know and love Jesus, we refuse merely to look out for ourselves. Jesus calls us to see the world not merely from our perspective but from God's. We seek to serve God's will by serving others. Maybe speaking in startling tones is Jesus' way of urging us to embrace a new manner of living – living not just for our own good but for the sake of others – a new manner of living that will come about in our lives when we choose to follow his way.

We may like to think of the Bible as a source of comfort and inspiration. It may serve that purpose at times. But if you read it thoughtfully, you'll discover that often the Bible *dis*-comforts by the way it challenges our tendency to think only of ourselves rather than considering God's will for the world. It was Mark Twain who observed, "Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand. But as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those that I *do* understand."⁴

We may be puzzled by individual passages of scripture, but what we *do* understand is this: Jesus calls us out of our complacent acceptance of the way things are; he calls us to follow his lead by dedicating our compassion and our energy – by devoting our lives – to serving God's will for the world.

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² SermonWriter, February 17, 2019, Volume xx, Number xx, ISSN 1071-9962

³ Isaiah 55:8-9 Good News Translation

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