

No “Insiders” or “Outsiders”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
February 13, 2022

Jeremiah 17:5-10 NRSV ⁵ Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. ⁶ They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. ⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. ⁹ The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? ¹⁰ I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Luke 6:17-26 NRSV ¹⁷ He came down [from the mountain] with [the twelve] and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

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

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “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.

²⁶ “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

That gospel reading from Luke probably sounded familiar, but also a little strange, a little different. It probably reminded you of the famous “Sermon on the Mount” from the Gospel of Matthew. When Luke and Matthew were collecting stories and oral histories and written documents about Jesus to include in their gospels, they probably used some of the same source materials. That’s why some parts of some gospels are strikingly similar.

But while these words in today’s reading from Luke’s gospel sounded familiar, they were also different from what we’re used to in Matthew’s gospel – different in a couple of ways.

First, in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus went to a crowd that had gathered on a mountainside, hence we’ve come to call that collection of teachings the “Sermon on the Mount.” In Luke’s

gospel, Jesus has just come down from a mountainside to a crowd that has gathered in a flat, open area, hence scholars often refer to this as Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain."

Another distinction between Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain is that according to Matthew, Jesus spoke in the third person: "blessed are the poor in spirit" (that is, "blessed are *those* people"). In Luke's version Jesus addressed the crowd directly: "blessed are you who are poor" [emphasis added]. Let's also note that Matthew's version places the blessings in a spiritual dimension: again, "blessed are the poor in spirit" compared to Luke's version "blessed are you who are poor" (that is, you who struggle because you don't have enough to live on).

A quick glance at your Bible will tell you that Matthew's presentation of the Sermon on the Mount is much longer than Luke's Sermon on the Plain version. One reason is that Matthew has Jesus presenting nine beatitudes or blessings compared to just four beatitudes in Luke's version. Also, Bible scholars believe Matthew embellished the material, adding text to explain what Jesus was talking about. And, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount included teachings of Jesus that Luke also used but placed elsewhere in his gospel rather than in the Sermon on the Plain. Because Luke's version is simpler in structure, scholars believe it probably more closely resembles the original version.

One obvious difference between Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain is that Luke's version presents beatitudes or blessings followed by statements of woe—some think of them as curses or judgments. Matthew's Sermon on the Mount doesn't have that. So in Luke after Jesus said

- Blessed are you who are poor...
- Blessed are you who are hungry now...
- Blessed are you who weep now...
- Blessed are you who [are reviled now]...

Jesus followed with

- "But woe to you who are rich...
- Woe to you who are full now...
- Woe to you who are laughing now...
- Woe to you [who wallow in popularity now]....

When we hear such lists that try to rate or rank people, we often find ourselves doing a self-assessment, wondering, "Where do I fit?" It's human nature. Sometimes when my wife Mary and I are on a long car ride, she will entertain me by giving me those quizzes that appear in magazines, like "How Culturally Sophisticated Are You Really?" or "How Eco-Friendly is Your Lifestyle?" or "Which Biblical Couple Are You?" We like to figure out how we stack up; we want to know where we land.

Well, when we hear Jesus pronouncing to the crowd a series of blessings and woes, we may find ourselves trying to decide, "Does that apply to me? Am I among the blessed? Surely I'm not destined to a life of woe. Which group would I be in?"

You might know that Presbyterian ministers are required to study both Hebrew and Greek while in seminary so we can appreciate the original languages the Bible was written in. One of the things I remember from studying Greek is that the little Greek word "*kai*" (και) can be translated two ways. "*Kai*" can mean "and," as in "this and that." "*Kai*" can also be translated as "but," as in "this but not that." When translating, one often has to decide from the context which meaning is intended.

Well, here's what I noticed when studying Jesus' Sermon on the Plain in Luke's gospel this week. When Jesus moved from pronouncing the statements of blessing to the statements of

woe, that transition is accomplished in Greek using the word “*kai*.” In every Bible translation I checked, it’s translated as “but” to establish a contrast between what precedes it and what follows it: in other words, “blessed are you...” *but* “woe to you...”

What if, though, we were to use that little word’s other meaning, translating “*kai*” as “and”? Then Jesus pronouncing blessings and woes wouldn’t be intended to separate people into “the good guys” and “the bad guys.” With Jesus saying, “blessed are you...” and “woe to you,” the meaning would be this: each of us is worthy of blessing at times and deserving of judgment at times. Jesus was not speaking just to those who are deserving of God’s favor. Jesus was speaking to us all.

That is reinforced by something that Luke said earlier in the passage—a point that we often don’t recognize as significant. Luke said that people who gathered on that plain to hear Jesus had come from all over: the countryside and villages of the province of Judea far to the south of the Galilee region, from Jerusalem (the principal city in Judea), and from the Mediterranean coast of Tyre and Sidon to the northwest (which was populated mostly by people who weren’t Jewish).

So as he pronounced these beatitudes and woes, Jesus was speaking to Jews and non-Jews, to city dwellers and rural folk, to struggling farmers and fishers and probably some successful merchants and civil servants. But he wasn’t saying that one group was acceptable and the other was not, that one group was blessed and the other was cursed.

Jesus was acknowledging that at any given time, each of us may be needy in some ways and well-off in others, unappreciated in some ways and admired in others, suffering in some aspects of life but also rejoicing because of blessings received. So the blessings and woes Jesus pronounced weren’t meant to put us into categories, weren’t meant to separate us from each other. Jesus was bringing us together, acknowledging life’s unpredictable complexity. As a New Testament scholar wrote, “The ‘beatitudes’ and ‘woes’ are not blessings or cursings upon those groups but are insights into their true condition.”¹

What can we take from this?

To follow Jesus we don’t have to wait until we have our lives all together and our ducks in a row and everything figured out. In the Sermon on the Plain we heard Jesus speak to us. He acknowledged that in our lives we can simultaneously experience both blessing and hardship, that we may deserve commendation for something and need correction for something else. You are justified, worthy because God made you, God claims you, God loves you. There are no “insiders” or “outsiders.”

Jesus invites all to be comforted and encouraged and filled with God’s love through him. Jesus invites you to know God by following him. Invite Jesus to guide how you think, to inspire how you speak, to direct what you do, so that all you are and all you do contributes to fulfilling God’s plan for you.

[sermons; se20220213; © 2022 JMF]

¹ E. Earl Ellis, The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Luke. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974, 112