

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – February 16, 2025
Luke 6:17-26
How Do We Relate To The Blessings In Our Lives?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus stands on a rock ledge and, looking down at the masses below, delivers a sermon that is considered, by Christians and non-Christians alike, to be among the most important teachings on morality in human history: the Sermon on the Mount.

It's not so well known or so widely celebrated, but, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives the same sermon – it's a shorter sermon, but it's essentially the same sermon, the main difference being that Jesus doesn't deliver it from the top of a mountain; he comes down from the heights to preach, as you heard in this morning's scripture lesson, from a "level place."

And so, this sermon is called not the Sermon on the Mount, but the Sermon on the Plain. Jesus was an itinerant preacher who travelled from village to village, from the hill country through rolling vineyards to the sea. Like all itinerant preachers – and like all preachers, period (as you may have noticed, we repeat ourselves a lot!) – he probably preached the same sermon more than once, preached it several times over, in one place, then another, then another. Jesus *might*, as Matthew's gospel says, might have given a sermon while standing on the top of a mountain, and then also might, as Luke's gospel says, also might have given a repeat of that same sermon while standing in a plain. That's very possible.

It's also very possible that, decades later, when Matthew and Luke were writing their gospels, nobody remembered *where* Jesus had given the sermon, and the setting of it in one place rather than another was an editorial decision.

So, like: As someone deeply formed in the Jewish faith, Matthew thought of Jesus as a Moses-like figure. We know this, because, when writing his gospel, all throughout it, he played up the parallels between Jesus and the great teacher. Maybe in having Jesus make his moral pronouncements from the top of a holy mountain, Matthew meant to evoke Moses, with the tablets of the ten commandments, atop Mount Sinai – so that we would understand Jesus to be the new *him*, the new Moses, the new great teacher, the new sage, and understand his Sermon on the Mount to be the new Torah, the new law of the land.

Luke, though – Luke didn't think about Jesus the same way that Matthew thought about Jesus. In Luke's mind, Jesus had less in common with Moses than he did with the Hebrew prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah. We know this, because, when writing *his* gospel, Luke played up the parallels between *them* instead.

Maybe that's why Luke had Jesus go where the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah before him had gone – down into the valley. Do you know the story of Ezekiel, whom God had led from the heights of the holy, hilltop city of Jerusalem, down into a valley, the very valley of the shadow of death? It was a valley filled with bones, with bones as far as the eye could see, with skeletons picked clean by scavenging birds and beasts, piled in great and gruesome heaps.

And God told Ezekiel to look out over that valley (it's the same Hebrew word for "plain" or "level place") and to lift his hands over that valley and proclaim: "Thus says the Lord God – 'I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.'"

Do you know the story of Jeremiah, whom God had sent down into another valley, another plain, another "level place" that was a place of death, where children had been burned alive as sacrifices to pagan gods? Jeremiah was to go and speak a word of hope there in that hell where the terrible fires still smoldered. Maybe Luke meant for us to see Jesus as a prophet like these prophets: as one who descends into the valleys of weeping, into the dark shadowlands where people suffer and die. And maybe he meant for us to see his Sermon on the Plain not as a second Torah, a second law, promulgated by a second Moses, but to see his Sermon on the Plain as a vision, a prophetic dream, a promise: of consolation and healing and redemption, of the life, of the victory that are coming.

That's what it seems like to me: "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry, 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.*" The setting of the sermon in one place rather than another changes, subtly changes, the sermon. From high up on the mountaintop, Matthew's great, Moses-like Jesus looks down at a faceless mass of humanity below and says, "*Blessed are the poor... Blessed are those who hunger... Blessed are those who mourn...*"

Matthew's Jesus does not speak in the intimacy of the second-person. There is a sense of distance and distancing. "*Blessed are those who...*" The blessings he pronounces are universal, are generic. But down in the valley, in the plain, among the people, where he can take them by the hand and see the tears welling up in their eyes, Luke's Jesus speaks in the most tender and personal of terms: "*Blessed are YOU...*" The blessings he pronounces are special and particular, are blessings that feel like they are *for* someone. But maybe that is not as lovely as it sounds. Because, well, what kind of blessings are these? "*Blessed are you who weep.*" Can you imagine Jesus saying that not – *not* – to weeping people in the abstract, but to *you*? Drawing near to *you* when you cry and when you cry so hard you shake and heave, and saying, "*Blessed are you now*"?

You could only ask, then: "Blessed? Blessed *how*? If this is what it is to be blessed – feeling this loss, this brokenness, this pain – if this is what it is to be blessed, then I would rather be cursed." It's important, I think, that these pronouncements of blessing, these beatitudes, are not moral exhortations; Jesus does not command us to go and be poor and hungry and sad and hated. These experiences of poverty and of pain are not good in and of themselves. We are not supposed to seek them out. He does not want them for us any more than we want them for ourselves.

But suffering, profound suffering, is a part of life. No one is spared it. In pronouncing these blessings, Jesus is showing us what spiritual posture we are to take toward it. First: There is no place for guilt or for brooding feelings of failure and responsibility. Bad things happen to us, and they don't happen because we are bad people who have it coming.

The blessing of God *is* upon those who suffer and who struggle. Suffering and struggling are not evidence of some moral failing. God has not turned away from those who are suffering or struggling. God is not punishing those who are suffering or struggling. The answer to the question of “What did I do to deserve this?” is almost always: “Nothing.”

Second: No matter how agonizing the pain, no matter how searing the loss, no matter the devastation or the depth of anguish – Jesus would have us see, would have us believe, that there is always a blessing in there somewhere. The pain is not all there is. The pain is never all there is. God can and God will shape the pain into something.

To be clear: This does not – *does not* – mean bad things happen *so that* good things can come of them. God does not cause us or cause anyone pain for the sake of some greater good. But if there is pain – which there will be; that’s life – if there is pain, God will put it to some good use. God will not let the pain be for nothing. God will not let the heartbreak be for nothing. When Jesus says, “Blessed are you who weep now,” he is saying, “Your pain is the raw material of which a blessing might be made. Let your pain become something more than pain.”

It would be nice if Jesus had stopped there, had stopped with the pronouncement of blessings. But, alas, with each blessing comes the proclamation of a corresponding woe. “*Woe to you...*” – and there again is that personal, that too-personal direct, second-person address that puts each of us, as individuals, in his crosshairs: “*Woe to YOU...*” – “*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 be mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you.*”

As it is with the beatitudes, so it is with these anti-beatitudes. Jesus would have us see that with pain can come blessing, and – *and* – that with blessing can come pain. This is not a threat. This is not a warning. This is a simple, true statement about the way things are.

And this, too, is an invitation; this is an invitation to take up a certain spiritual posture – not toward suffering now, but toward prosperity, success, comfort, and happiness. That these are things, are experiences, to be related to in a certain way, that there is a right way and a wrong way to relate to them – this is a radical, countercultural claim in and of itself.

Our culture has nothing whatsoever to say about how we are to relate to our prosperity, our success, our comfort, our happiness. It has no wisdom to offer. What else would we do with the blessings in our lives, what else would we do with the blessings of prosperity, of success, of comfort, of happiness, what else would we do but *enjoy them*, but sit back and enjoy them? Isn’t that just what we are told the good life *is*?

And yet, Jesus would have us take care in how we relate to the blessings in our lives. We are to relate to them thoughtfully, morally, Christianly. We are to relate to them wisely, purposefully, in a way that is worthy of them.

Because there is a sense, a real sense, a profound sense, in which our riches can make us poor – as anyone living in Darien, Connecticut knows very well. There is a certain way of leading a busy, full life that can leave us empty inside. If we let them, prosperity and success and comfort

and even happiness itself can make us boring, envious, mean, arrogant, lonely, and selfish. If all we do is *enjoy* the good things in our lives – and they *are* good things, to be enjoyed, but – if all we do is enjoy the good things in our lives, if we don't see that these good things must be put to some good use, they will ruin us.

Blessings can be the death of us. As with pain, our blessings are not all there is. Our blessings are never all there is. We must let God shape our blessings into something more than *our*; than just our, blessings, or they will become woes. They will.

Most of us in this church have done well for ourselves. In one way or another, we have done well for ourselves. Jesus's question, then, is: Okay. So what? What now? You have what you have. What is it all for? What is being in good health for? What is being able to enjoy a comfortable retirement for? What is having a great job for? What is having a loving family for? What is having some money in the bank for? What is time, is the time we have for? What is being alive for? What is it all for? For just getting drunk and sick on? Or doing something with?

There are as many different ways of answering those questions as there are people who ask them. But church is one of the few places in this world in which they are reliably asked. The most important thing we do each week in worship is pass the plates. That is an extraordinary act of confrontation, an inescapable posing of those "what is it all for?" questions. The offering is a time for introspection, for spiritual stock-taking, for hard, honest inner wrestling. What are blessings for? Am I a person who knows what to do with them? In every blessing is hidden a calling: Have I heard it? Have I answered it? The morning's offering will be given and received.