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"Plain Talk"

Jeremiah 17:5-10 Psalm 1 Luke 6:17-26 I Corinthians 15:12-20

¹⁷ He came down with them 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 ^{la} 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. Luke 6:17-26

Throughout the gospels when Jesus delivers a sermon or teaches through a parable, the disciples are slow to understand. One humorist records his speculation on some of the reasons their understanding was not as forthcoming. Here's his version of the disciples reaction to the Sermon on the Plain.

Simon Peter said, "Are we supposed to write this down?"

And Andrew asked, "Are we supposed to know this?"

And James asked, "Will we have a test on this?"

And Phillip said, "I don't have any paper."

And Bartholomew asked, "Do we have to turn this in?"

And John said, "The other disciples didn't have to learn this."

And Matthew said, "Where are your objectives and lesson plans?"

And Judas asked, "What does this have to do with real life?"

and Jesus wept. 1

They were having a hard time in THEIR confirmation class.

In Matthew there are nine Beatitudes or Blessings. They are the preface to the Sermon on the Mount. In the gospel of Luke there are only four Beatitudes. They are the preface to what is called the Sermon on the Plain.

In Luke it is called the Sermon on the Plain because in the older translations it says "he came down from the mountain and stood on the plain." The newer translations, like the one read for us this morning, say "he came down from the mountain and stood at a level place." Why they chose to translate the Greek as "a level place" rather than as a plain is not plain to me. Actually, the "Sermon on the Level" might make more sense.

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is directed to a Jewish audience. Good Jews knew that all important events happened on a mountain. The law came from Mount Sinai. Moses views the Promised Land from Mount Pisgah. Elijah faced 4,000 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The temple is built on Mount Zion.

Luke, on the other hand, writes for a Greek audience. His gospel is a down-to-earth account for the common person. In the Sermon on the Plain the King of this kingdom comes down from the heights of a mountain where He spent the night in prayer. At daybreak, He called together all those who claimed to be His disciples and then they all went down the mountain to where there was a crowd of people waiting for Him. Jesus went to where the people were, and He met them right where they were, physically AND in doing so, met them spiritually.

This was a very diverse group surrounding Jesus and they came for a diversity of reasons: some wanted to hear Him, some wanted to be healed, others wanted to be delivered of evil spirits, but all wanted to touch Him.

Have you noticed how people want to touch someone famous? The red carpet for tonight's Oscars has red ropes to keep people back. But Jesus talks about a kingdom in which there is no royal distance between its ruler and its ruler's subjects. In Jesus, God came down to our level for plain talk.

People wanted to touch Jesus because they wanted what He had. You can imagine a crowd of people who are sick and demon possessed would not be the quietest crowd around. But once Jesus healed them, having relieved their distress and discomfort, He had an opportunity to teach.

As Jesus looked at the multitude surrounding Him, He was filled with compassion for them; for all of them... He says, "Bless you, you who are poor. ...Bless you, as you hunger. ...Bless you, as you weep. ...Oh, bless you when you are hated and excluded and mocked and cursed because you identified with me. Let me reassure you; the Kingdom of God is for you, and you will be satisfied. You're not the first people who have been treated this way, and you won't be the last, but a great reward is waiting for you in heaven, so rejoice! If you aren't satisfied on earth, you will be in heaven, but you will surely receive your reward."

The problem with our society is that we don't understand the power nor the dynamics of giving a blessing. We underestimate its power and we are not in the habit of showing empathy. Few people are tuned in to other's feelings of rejection. Most ignore them completely. Many simply "stuff" them, hoping that they will go away. We are a people that want to fix problems. We want answers and a rational explanation for everything that happens. You may have heard someone try to comfort someone with the unbiblical statement, "Everything happens for a reason." Yes, sometimes the reason is you did something dumb."

Some believe that hard work and discipline will make everything turn out right. I heard a story of a man with a critical illness was lying in a hospital bed, desperately wanting some word of encouragement. A nurse said to him, "you just need to work harder." That nurse said something dumb. This man had undergone multiple surgeries and was critically ill. He didn't need a rebuke. He needed a "blessing." 2

The first few weeks that I served communion I was not aware of your tradition to give a blessing to those who have not yet been confirmed. I saw young people come forward that didn't take communion, but I didn't know I was to offer a blessing. So this morning as we kneel to share in the sacrament I will try to give a quadruple blessing to those who missed out those first 3 weeks.

Professor John Killinger in his book "Letting God Bless You" relates the story of a beautiful woman who is ninety years old and has always been extremely generous with everything she has. He says, "She helps foreign students who want to come to this country to study. She sends flowers and food to people who have had a distressing time of any kind. She gives frequent dinners and parties in order to be able to introduce people to one another. Often she sends theater and concert tickets to people she knows would appreciate them but can't afford to buy them. She is always doing something nice for somebody or giving somebody something he or she needs. Everyone loves her because of her selflessness and generosity."

"He said to her one day, "You are so good to everybody." "Oh no," she said, "It is God who has been good to me. He has given me so much more than I can ever use. The more I give away, the more I have. It is wonderful!" 3

I think she was like Lydia Biegert who I had lunch with yesterday. After lunch we went to her apartment and shared communion. As I was preparing to leave she asked, "Can I have a hug?" I said, "Of course." I told her about an article my wife shared with me this week from UCLA neuroscience researcher Alex Korb that one of four ways to create an upward spiral of happiness in your life is through hugs. Research shows getting five hugs a day increases happiness big time. Lydia gave me two more. I was blessed.

As Jesus was blessing the poor and the hungry and the sorrowful and the mocked I imagine that some of the crowd was laughing and mocking as Jesus

said these things. After all, the common understanding of the day was that if you were wealthy it was because God was blessing you and if you were poor it was because God was punishing you. Who was this teacher who was saying just the opposite of what they believed to be the truth?

The text doesn't say so, but I can imagine that Jesus turned to those in the crowd who had been laughing at him and with the same compassion and love in His eyes and said, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have your only happiness now. Woe to you who are satisfied and prosperous now, for a time of hunger is before you all. Woe to you who laugh carelessly, for your laughing will turn to mourning and sorrow. Woe to you who are praised by the crowds, for their ancestors also praised false prophets."

Jesus wasn't condemning them. He was lamenting at their attitudes—these were his "be-not attitudes." The word translated "woe" is an expression of grief. It could also be translated "Alas," or "Oh My!", or maybe, "Woah." hold on, wait a minute, watch out." Jesus is grieved over them, so He was warning them, encouraging them to change before it was too late. Their being rich wasn't the problem; it was thinking that they had an "in" with God simply because they were rich.

In the culture of Jesus' day, it was thought that there was a limited supply of everything: grain, livestock, love, honor, friendship, reputation, power. Everything was distributed as God saw fit and if you didn't have it, that was because God didn't want you to have it, because you didn't deserve it. They thought that God gave more to those who were worthy and less to those who weren't. Therefore, you could see exactly where God's favor rested by seeing who had more "stuff."

Jesus wanted the people to realize that there was enough of everything for everybody. God has enough love for everybody, enough grace for everybody, enough compassion for everybody. If the people who have more grain will share with those who have less, there will be enough. If those who have more honor will share with those who have less, everyone will feel valued.

Last Thursday was a day that many remembered a man who was known for sharing love with others—St. Valentine. On a day when grocery stores were overflowing with hearts and candy and flowers we were also reminded of what happened one year ago on that day when 17 students and staff were murdered at Parkland High School in Parkland, Florida. Then on the next day, last Friday, 5 workers at a plant in Aurora, Illinois were killed and 5 first responding officers were wounded when a co-worker was being fired after 15 years on the job. In the same week that we have shared the blessings of love, others have experienced the woes of devastating loss.

A hospital social worker was a wonderful human being: compassionate, warm, down-to-earth, and a dynamic advocate for her clients. She was surprised when her college-age daughter had decided to switch her major to social work. She

said to her mother, "You know, mom, because of what you and dad have taught me, I'm never going to be rich. But that's okay. There are better ways of being rich than having a lot of money.

That young woman understood correctly that you can be wealthy without being rich, you can be satisfied without being full, you can be honorable without being honored, and you can rejoice without being self-absorbed. More importantly, she understood that our lives are intricately interwoven, and there can be no real peace, no real sense of well-being until there is peace and well-being for all of us. 4

This week I saw a quote from Martin Luther that said, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing".

I live my life in this world, but not for this world. If I live for this world only, then I shall seek to avoid poverty, hunger, sorrow, and ridicule at all costs. But if I live for the Lord and his kingdom, then I shall follow him at all costs -- even if it means experiencing, poverty, sorrow, and estrangement in exchange for all the riches, laughter and affirmation in the world.

We are blessed because we have come to know the One who didn't keep his distance, but came down from the heavens ABOVE the mountains and descended to our level, to bless us ... and warn us with ...plain talk.

Let's pray. Lord, we are so blessed. When we use our gifts to glorify you we are blessing you. How we love you and we want to be a blessing to the poor, the hungry, the rejected, the despised, and the outcasts. We want to extend your warning to the rich, the full, the accepted, the admired, so that they won't miss out on your blessing! Thank you Lord for coming down to our level...to bless and warn. Amen.

1. James T. Garrett, God's Gift, CSS Publishing Company
2. Keith Wagner, Overcoming Rejection
3. ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by Brett Blair
4. Rev. Verne Arens, "Plain Speaking"