

## Jesus and a Flat World

Luke 6: 17-26

The Beatitudes in Luke's gospel strike with an abrupt power. They can teach us as Matthew's *more spiritual* beatitudes may not. Jesus comes down from the mountain, where he and his disciples were having a time of prayer together. He comes to a level place and there finds crowds of people. They've come to hear him and to be healed by him. They were healed and they heard a message that still speaks to us.

Jesus fixed his eyes on the disciples and taught them. The crowd could hear, but the teaching was addressed to the disciples. These words were intended for those who were already following Jesus, whose commitment was to be in his presence, rather than those who wanted to get something – even something as valuable as healing.

Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." The poor are not some third party. They are the disciples, the followers.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." The Greek word *makarioi*, translated blessed, conveys the idea of inner happiness and that good fortune has befallen you – maybe the feeling you'd get if you win the lottery! Good fortune is yours when people hate you, exclude you, revile you, and defame you on my account.

Was Jesus saying that it is better to be poor? Was he teaching that God has a *preferential option* for the poor?" Most of Jesus' followers were poor, but not all! There was a clear focus on the poor and the dispossessed in Jesus' ministry. At the same time, he had some wealthy friends and he didn't turn them away.

Jesus was an itinerant teacher, mostly homeless, but he didn't seem to suffer for it. He had places to stay, food to eat, and parties to attend. Some even criticized Jesus for being too much of a partygoer and drinker. Yes, there is a preference for the poor in Jesus' teaching, but it seems to be the attitude toward and among the poor and the wealthy that is crucial.

Luke's gospel adds material that is not found anywhere else – the *woes*. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Jesus is still speaking to the disciples. "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. 'Woe to you when all speak well of you.'"

What kind of world did Jesus (and Luke) seem to be imagining with sayings like these? Either it's a world of great scarcity where everyone is poor and looking forward to an afterlife of opulence or it's just the opposite.

What I hear Jesus saying in this passage, and his other teachings, describes the opposite of scarcity. Ironically, these Beatitudes and woes describe Jesus' vision of a world of almost unimaginable abundance. They are describing an attitude of great bounty.

You're blessed when you've lost it all because there is nothing to distract you from finding God's kingdom. You're blessed to be ravenously hungry because you're really ready to eat the bread of life. This interpretation does not dismiss the reality and evil of poverty, hunger, and suffering of all kinds. Surely it is clear that, as followers of Jesus, we are called to bring relief to those who are suffering, find a solution for poverty, and foster an end to world hunger. This is very clear.

Jesus is addressing attitude! He's saying you're fortunate when you're that open and ready to embrace all that life has to give and to give all you have to give. The way of Jesus is to live life with a sense of bounty and inner joy.

What do these *Beatitudes* and woes imply for us? They remind us that life gets precarious when you coast, play it safe, play the victim, or follow only paths of least resistance. There are real dangers in hiding your talents or in being miserly with what you have to offer to life. It is risky business to hold back for fear that there won't be enough. We all face the temptation to hoard our gifts, our time, our energy, our creativity, and even our money. They all can seem to be fixed quantities – a zero sum.

When we become stingy with ourselves and our gifts, we'll find that what we have is all we'll get. Even that starts to fade in time. When we share freely, what we have multiplies in ways we never dreamed.

Eight years ago, many of you stepped out of a safe zone to form a new congregation. Five years ago, this congregation stepped out of a safe zone and called a pastor to join its existing staff – a pastor from the coast. It was a big financial and cultural risk, though it seems to be working out okay. Three years ago, this congregation celebrated its fifth anniversary of existence with a big party. At the same time, it also stepped out by presenting a full-scale musical *Godspell*. That worked out all right, and the next year it presented *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Now, musical theater has become a piece of our identity and a source of excitement.

Two years ago, this congregation surprised itself again. Deciding that we had too much to lose with business as usual, we stepped out and did a capital campaign, pledging an additional almost \$300,000 above and beyond our annual budget. Last year, we bought this building that is now a physical expression of our church community and a source of excitement and opportunity. Many new friends have joined us as a result.

This congregation has also stepped out in other ways. There is the sewing machine project in Guatemala and also mission trips to Guatemala, Pine Ridge Reservation, Mountain Top, etc. These have become part of our identity and a source of excitement.

Some efforts are no longer part of our congregational life. Neighborhood Partnership and Community LINC were very good for those who participated. Now we've moved on. Each time we've stepped out as a congregation, these new projects have not been a *check-off* on our cosmic *To Do* list: "Thank God that's done -- one less thing ahead of us to do! No! Each time we have stepped out has been a sign of encouragement, a deposit on the future, and evidence that life begets life!

The vision that Jesus saw and shared, the nature of God's creative ideal toward which we as a human race need to strive, is the Biblical concept of *Shalom*. While we translate it as peace, it really means PEACE! -- much more dynamic. *Shalom* implies wholeness, living in a way that is fully connected with a sense of abundance and bounty flowing in and flowing out of our lives. This is the vision Jesus saw and shared.

Given that this vision of Jesus is now ours, how should we, as people of faith, channel our efforts and energies? The first thing to do is live ourselves in that vision Jesus shared. We as self-proclaimed people of faith are living examples of a high calling to place ourselves in the flow of the Spirit.

How do you do that? To live in that vision is to live with an attitude of bounty. It is to live to our full capacity – brains, bodies, energy, and passion. Knowing that people have different levels of energy, talents, and resources, it is to be open to the life of God in us and around us – to trust in its abundance. It is to live with the attitude of starving people who find food, who feast on the bread of life, the meat of hope, and the succulence of the Spirit.

We are called, as church, to be an example of the life we proclaim. We have the privilege and obligation to invite and nurture others in that vision, in that life. It can be as simple as inviting people you know to come to worship with you here, to experience our community in worship, or to participate in some of the great opportunities we're offering during Lent. To participate yourself and invite others to participate with you in the life of this congregation is a powerful way to live and exemplify the attitude of abundance.

Jesus came down from the mountain and stood in a flat place to meet the people and teach the disciples. The author of Luke's gospel wouldn't have realized the power of his image, but Jesus was also proclaiming a flat world – a world of lowering barriers and level playing fields. Tom Friedman's wonderful book, *The World Is Flat*, offers this image to describe living after the fall of the barrier of the Berlin wall and the rise of Internet Technology with all its potential to level the playing fields of business, political, and personal interaction.

The world is flattening as more people communicate directly with each other. People from around the world can create together. Small companies can look big on the Internet – buying and selling around the world. Big companies can look small and personal – offering customers the freedom to create and shape product tailored to need.

There is evidence of a level playing field developing so that even the most powerful countries can't control world events. The key to success in such a world is collaboration. No one is immune. Everyone has to work together to get things done for the good of all. We in the United States are proud of our strength, both military and economic. But we, too, are not immune.

The really painful challenges we face as a society have the potential to be gifts to wake us up from the numbness of our *specialness* and the mistaken belief that the rules of life for other countries don't really apply to us. The god of American nationalist religion is a false god, just like the god of Muslim Jihadist extremism. They are false gods that we need to reject. But there is a real God calling us, and all people, to embrace lives of bountiful hope, passionate possibility, and deep joy.

We can help each other, and the community around us, to begin to embrace that way of living. We can do that by living in hope, by being a people with more dreams than memories -- more focused on the future than the past, and more energized by where we're going than by where we've been.

Today is the time to release the fears bound up in memories of the past. It's time for them to let you go. Today is the time to release that frantic grip on that way of being that says, "I can't, I can't!" It's time to reorient our lives on what can be. There are wonderful opportunities in front of us to begin to live a life together of Beatitude. Here is a vision of what such a life can be:

As we keep break down these barriers, bridge these divides and reach out to join hands with one another, we can stand up together and speak out together. We can denounce every form of violence and injustice and announce a great new vision of peace and justice. Together we will be able to say unpopular things like: End the war and occupation on Iraq; bring the troops home now; make reparations to the people of Iraq; let the United Nations resolve the crisis nonviolently; end the occupation of Palestinians; support nonviolent Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers, the Jewish vision of shalom and human rights for Palestinians; end all U.S. military

aid and warmaking in Colombia; stop all surveillance on peace and justice activists; close all U.S. terrorist training camps, beginning with Fort Benning's notorious "School of Assassins," and close the C.I.A., the N.S.A., the F.B.I., and the Pentagon--close them all!; leave the World Trade Organization; lift the entire Third World debt; distribute free medicine to everyone with HIV/AIDS; abolish the death penalty; welcome every immigrant and undocumented person; rebuild New Orleans and its levees and take care of its victims; house the homeless; grant universal healthcare; fund nonviolence education in every school on the planet; stop rigging our elections; undertake treaties for nuclear disarmament; join the World Court; obey international law; sign the Kyoto accord; fund alternatives to fossil fuels; stop global warming; end the Star Wars program; disarm Los Alamos; cut the entire military budget; abolish every one of our nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction; and then redirect those hundreds of billions of dollars toward the hard work for a lasting peace by feeding every starving child and refugee on the planet in a massive new Global Marshall Plan. Together, we can announce and welcome a new world of nonviolence, with peace and social justice for everyone on the planet. Amen! (Rev. John Dear, presentation to Network for Spiritual Progressives Conference, Washington, DC, 5/18/06)

There is a whole world of hope and possibility standing right in front of you, right in front of us. But we have to commit ourselves to living with bounty.

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy; the chance to draw back; always ineffectiveness, concerning all acts of initiative and creation. There is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment [you] definitely commit yourself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help you that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in your favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no one could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now. (Goethe)

Begin it now and you will be blessed. Begin it now and you will be a blessing.