

February 13, 2022
“Blessed, Part 1 – The Root of Blessing”
Psalm 1 / Luke 6:17-26
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“Blessed, Part 1.”

That’s what I’m calling the sermon today; actually, “Blessed, Part 1 – The Root of Blessing.” The ROOT of Blessing. And in case you’re wondering, not to worry, this is not Part 1 of seven or 10 anything ambitious like that. Just Part 1 of 2. A truly epic – and for the record, my first-ever – sermon series spanning not one, but two, Sundays.

So I don’t know what your plans are for next week, but I’m just saying, to get the full effect, you’re gonna have to come to worship again to catch the sequel!

With that truly shameless and completely unserious plug, on with Part 1 – The Root of Blessing.

The current lectionary cycle, which began in Advent, focuses our attention on the gospel of Luke.

If you were with us last week, you’ll recall that we found Jesus out on a boat with the three fishermen who would become his first disciples. Teaching the crowds gathered along the shoreline, and then initiating what turned out to be a miraculous, unprecedented catch of fish that ultimately prompted Peter, James and John to drop everything and follow him.

Between that text and this week’s text, as Cord just read for us, A LOT happens. Jesus heals a leper and a paralytic. He calls a fourth disciple to follow him, this time a generally despised tax collector named Levi (aka Matthew) – despised for all the reasons you’d expect by virtue of his profession. Then he mixes it up with the Pharisees, as he will get in the habit of doing or as they will get in the habit of making him do – in this case, around the nature of the company he keeps and questions about what is lawful on the Sabbath.

And finally, he heads up a mountain to pray, and chooses the rest of his 12 disciples.

It's coming down from that mountain that we find Jesus this morning, along with his freshly commissioned band of disciples. Verse 17: "He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great crowd multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon."

He is about to deliver what we know now as the "Sermon on the Plain," his second major address in Luke's gospel, and a complement to the more elaborate and more well known "Sermon on the Mount" found in Matthew's gospel.

Both beginning with so-called "beatitudes" – beatitude meaning supreme happiness or blessedness. There are many similarities and overlaps between the two sermons, but the first DIFFERENCE is in their locations.

In Matthew, Jesus goes UP the mountain to teach, AWAY from the crowds, very intentionally recalling the divine revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. Matthew, written primarily for a Jewish audience, is full of such references to Moses.

In Luke, again, Jesus comes DOWN the mountain and stands on a "level place." Note the careful use of language and literary intention on the part of Luke's author. Jesus is literally and FIGURATIVELY preaching from a LEVEL place. We are meant to see Jesus as down to earth, among the people, very much with them at their level. He is, in Luke, SURROUNDED by crowds of people who've come to hear him and find healing. And the text suggests that everyone did, even those who managed only to touch him.

That "level" perspective is underscored in the nature of the specific beatitudes presented in each sermon.

Among the nine beatitudes Jesus shares in Matthew, we get some like this: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." And "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Contrast that with Luke. Among the four beatitudes Jesus presents, we hear: "Blessed are you who are poor" – YOU, not they; and POOR, not "poor in spirit" – "Blessed are

YOU who are POOR, for YOURS is the kingdom of God." And "Blessed are YOU who are hungry NOW, for YOU will be filled."

Jesus is preaching to those who are actually poor and actually hungry. He meets them at their level. He sees them where they are, within the harsh reality of political, religious and social oppression. He includes them, and welcomes them into another reality as no one else has.

The kingdom of God does indeed belong to the poor in spirit and those who hunger for righteousness, but it also belongs to those who are literally poor and hungry. Who don't have enough of what they need even to survive. This is the social gospel harkening back to the prophets, reminding all who would hear that God's priority is ALWAYS – and has ALWAYS been – those most vulnerable.

Earlier in Luke, Jesus is teaching in his hometown, Nazareth, and is eventually driven out of town and nearly thrown off a cliff after he mic drops with a quote from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. . . Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This is Jesus the clear-eyed, courageous social activist, renewing the divine vision of a kingdom decidedly NOT of this world. A kingdom that belongs PRECISELY to those who are left out of the kingdoms that ARE of this world.

And on the flip side of that same vision, a kingdom that does NOT fundamentally belong to those who ARE included, privileged, celebrated in the kingdoms of this world. Jesus is ALSO preaching to those who have more than enough and more than enough to eat, who are therefore content with the way things are. The status quo.

Mirroring the beatitudes, Jesus says, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry."

This is Jesus flipping the script, resetting kingdom priorities and values, as he will do again and again to make his point that the way things are is not the way things have to be. And is definitely not the way God intended. Intends.

The first will be last and the last first. The least will be greatest and the greatest least. But understand that Jesus does not mean that the poor will be rich and the rich will be poor; or that the hungry will be full, and the full will be hungry. In the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love, NOBODY'S poor. NOBODY'S hungry. Everyone and everything has what it needs, as God intended from the very beginning. As God intends still.

Steve Garnass-Holmes writes, "It's not that it's great to be poor. Or hungry or mourning. But that blessing comes from God, not from wealth or satisfaction or happiness. Not that those who are at ease now will be punished later, but that ease is not life, and if that's what you seek, sooner or later you will mourn what you missed. So don't miss it."

It's so much deeper than that. This, I think is, what the Psalmist is getting at in our other reading this morning. The first verse of the first Psalm, translated in the New Revised Standard Version, reads, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers, . . ."

But hear again the translation from Stephen Mitchell that we heard earlier: "Blessed are (those) who have grown beyond their greed and have put an end to their hatred and no longer nourish illusions." I love this translation!

Blessed are YOU who have grown beyond your greed and your hatred and no longer nourish illusions. The kind of illusions so creatively and convincingly packaged and relentlessly promoted by false prophets to maintain the kingdoms of THIS world:

Blessed are you who are greedy, rich, famous, powerful, strong, brave, well educated, busy, smart, pretty, thin.

Blessed are you who are white, straight, heterosexual, men, cisgender, able-bodied, "American." Blessed are you who speak English.

Blessed are you who are Christian.

Blessed are you who fall in line, who fit in.

Blessed are you who do whatever it takes to get what you want, to win. Blessed are you who have the most and biggest guns. Blessed are you who show no mercy, who are quick to take up arms and slow to put them down.

Blessed are you who are quick to speak and slow to listen.

Blessed are you who have the latest thing, or have the most Instagram followers.

Blessed are you who have pulled yourself up by your bootstraps, who have worked hard for what you have, who make an "honest" living and so earn your right to healthcare.

Blessed are you who are "self-sufficient," who take care of yourself and your families.

Blessed are you who understand that freedom only means you can do and say whatever you want.

I could go on. You could go on. If we were in person I'd invite you to add to the list. It's a long list. The false prophets are everywhere, Jesus says. And it's these illusions that keep us – individually and collectively – from seeing and experiencing the divine blessedness that already is, in and all around us, and that keep us from trusting and participating in the divine blessedness to come. That Jesus promises.

In calling forth blessedness for those who are poor and hungry NOW, confirming their full and equal citizenship within the kingdom of God, Jesus is opening a future filled with hope, the promise of radical social change and future blessing that flies in the face of a present, oppressive reality for so many.

But I want to suggest that Jesus, like the Psalmist, is also affirming the blessedness, the blessing, that already is. Blessed ARE you . . . for yours IS the kingdom of God. The kingdom, as he says elsewhere, that is already at hand, in our midst, within each of us.

The ROOT of blessing is God, or however you describe the Divine presence. God is the root of blessing, the source of all blessing, the "fount of every blessing" as the hymn

describes it. So don't lose sight of that truth, of the blessings we all share in common – as we prayed earlier, the gift of life itself, of each day, of breath, of body and spirit, of the earth, of each other. The gift of possibility ever before us.

These are divine blessings that ground us all in a foundation of divine blessedness. We are the ones who continue to nourish illusions that get in the way, our own ways and each other's ways, of seeing and experiencing and living out of such blessedness.

The root of blessing is God, and because God is the root, BLESSING is the root. Blessing IS the root, at the heart, of all that is. We have been taught to read the Genesis creation story as a story of "original sin," but it is, above all else, a story of "original blessing." Blessing, divine, supreme blessedness, goodness, present from the very beginning.

With that in mind, I want to close Part 1 of this mini sermon series with the community prayer we prayed earlier. Let us pray again.

God of eternal blessing, for the gift of this day, like no other, we give you thanks and praise. For the gift of life, all life, our lives, precious in your sight, we give you thanks and praise. For the gifts of mind and heart and body, for all that makes us who we are as your beloved, for all that enables us to engage with ourselves and the world around us, we give you thanks and praise.

For the gift of the earth, generous source of nourishment and beauty, we give you thanks and praise. For the gift of each other, equally your beloved, with and for whom we have the opportunity to grow in relationship, in community, in love, we give you thanks and praise.

And for the promise of your kingdom, of peace with justice, of enough for all, we give you thanks and praise. As those who are so blessed, we pray for whatever we need to grow beyond all illusions, to ignore all false prophets, and to live and love according to that promise. Amen.

May it be so.

And don't forget to tune in next week for "Blessed, Part 2 – The FRUIT of Blessing!"