

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
February 11, 2007

Luke 6:17-26

Beatitudes

The lesson from the gospel according to Luke has a familiar ring to it...blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you. The more familiar rendition of what is known as the “Beatitudes” is found in the gospel according to Matthew...blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Both writers place these words of Jesus in the midst of what is known as the sermon on the mount from Matthew and here in Luke, the sermon on the plain. In Matthew Jesus goes up on the mountain to preach and in Luke, Jesus comes down from the mountain to a level place to bring God’s message to the people.

The people—they are all around Jesus. The chosen 12 who have in the previous passage been called to follow Jesus on this journey, a crowd of disciples who also want to follow this miracle worker, and people from all Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon are the multitude before Jesus. Gathered on the level place were Jew and Gentile. The diseased and infirmed are there seeking to be healed. Many of the people were the ones without power and perhaps without hope.

Before Jesus are people with very little to offer beyond their enthusiasm and their devotion. In these words that turn the world as it is upside down, the people are given God’s plan for the future. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

The writer of Luke takes the reversal, the upside down of God’s intentions, one step further and warns those who are rich and filled and laughing that the tables will be turned. “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.”

Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon “God's Ferris Wheel” says this about Luke’s blessings and woes. “The Beatitudes describe different types of people...Jesus hopes people will recognize themselves as one or another...the promise to both is that the way things are is not the way things will always be. We often equate the blessing and woes with reward and punishment, however the beatitudes do not tell us what to do, but who we are and who Jesus is.”

Luke puts Jesus on a level place. I see the “level place” as a metaphor for our shared humanity. Rich and poor, happy and sad, good and bad, we all share the

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common unity of God as our creator and our fellow human beings as companions. Jesus too shared our humanity, our fears, our tears, our joys and our life.

The “unleveling” enters in as we try to separate others from us or separate ourselves from those we label undesirable, failures, losers. We unlevel the field when we accept the lie that we are individuals and not the family of God.

Jesus is asking the question—Do you really think that the suffering family next door has nothing to do with you? Jesus is trying to gather everyone together, just as he has just been gathering disciples for his journey. In a sense, he's offering an existential choice—be the community that God has created you to be or live the delusion that you can go it alone.

Sondra Ely Wheeler in counseling “Christians who seek to live faithfully within an affluent society,” offers these excellent questions for people of faith as we examine our lives:

1. Do we find ourselves at liberty to hear God’s call to us, whatever it is, or are we too encumbered by the things we own—or the things we desire? A colleague said that we have to distinguish between needs and wants, and he says the only real need we have is toilet paper...everything else is a want.
2. On what basis do we make decisions about where we work, where we live, and what we do with our time?
3. What do these decisions reveal about the central values of our lives, and how do they contribute to reinforcing them?
4. To what extent does our material prosperity rest upon and help to perpetuate unjust structures and institutions?
5. Can we...justify the present allocation of our material resources in light of the needs of those we call sisters and brothers?¹

The disciples who came to hear Jesus on that level place long ago lived very differently from us and yet it was no easier for them than it is for us today to discern the will of God. We seek to be certain of what God asks, what is the right way to live, and if we are on the right path. That is the very thing that none of us who proclaim the gospel can offer. We cannot know certitude, but only a way, a journey of faith. The only way we come to know these things is by accepting the call to follow and embarking on the journey.

¹ Sondra Ely Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions*.

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Writing about what she has learned about the will of God, Wendy Wright says:

If you think you sense the will of God in your life in some long-range, highly detailed plan, something you can see stretching out with clear goals and successes into the future—that is *not* the will of God. If, however, you have an insistent sense that the next, very hesitant step beyond which you can see nothing is in fact the step that must be taken, that is most likely the will of God for you.²

Not only do we as individuals stand at the dawn of each new day with choices before us as to how we will live in response to God’s call, we as a community of faith stand with choices before us as well. The questions posed earlier are the same questions we must ask as a community of people who journey together with God, known to us in the one called Jesus.

We have been given the task of sharing of God’s love in this place and time. That task is not without a cost—both personal and financial. We made a commitment to keep the doors of this church open in order to welcome all who enter, regardless of economic status, race, age, creed, gender, and sexual orientation. “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

One thing I do know for certain—God goes with us on this journey always and forever. May we be blessed with courage for the journey.

² Wendy M. Wright, *The Rising: Living the Mysteries of Lent, Easter, and Pentecost* (Upper Room books: Nashville, 1994) 35.