

Sermon on the Plain

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

Luke 6:17-26

February 16-17, 2019

Grace and peace to you from Christ, who promises changed lives and communities. Reversal and renewal. Both now and in the future. Amen.

Move 1: Introduction

Today's Gospel passage is a continuation of Jesus' ministry as told through the lens of the author Luke. And it's important to point out how Jesus got to this point.

We hear that great multitudes of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coasts of Tyre and Sidon have come to hear Jesus. To be healed. To witness Jesus demonstrate acts that the Kingdom of God is here and breaking in.

But Jesus' big following of people didn't happen by accident. There was intentionality in how Jesus got to this point. After being rejected in his hometown, Jesus realized that the solo, lone-ranger model didn't work. So, Jesus changes his game up.

Jesus goes off and prays. Renews and re-centers himself. Then he calls the Twelve. Builds his team. And then, together, they begin ministry of healing and preaching. Performing miracles and proclaiming the good news to the poor.

The order of events matters. How Jesus engages the community and participates in ministry matters. Because, as Fr. Henri Nouwen points out, our ordering for mission often doesn't reflect that of Jesus. We do things quite the opposite, in fact.

When presented a problem, we first tend to try to solve it alone. If that doesn't work, we form a committee. And if that doesn't work, we pray.

But for Jesus, mission *starts* with prayer. Then team, community. Then, together, the team, the community engages the world, the injustices and issues facing others.

Three steps to how we participate in God's mission: Prayer. Team. Engagement with the world.

In this week's Gospel, Jesus is continuing to engage the community. Continuing that hard ministry to turn the world upside down. Continuing to proclaim a message that is countercultural and, because of this, he faces lots of scrutiny, opposition, and resistance.

Move 2: Concert and level place

In this weekend's story, Jesus meets the crowds and disciples on a level place. It's a small detail but an important one that I'd like us to unpack.

Level place. Jesus isn't in a raised pulpit or up on a hill where all people can see him. He doesn't have a microphone for his voice to carry. He is on the same level as everyone else.

Imagine yourself there in the crowd.

I immediately relate the experience to concerts. Imagine you are on the floor listening to your favorite band or singer.

When Katie and I go to concerts, we are not standing on the level floor. No, we sit. I want to see and not be claustrophobic the entire time. Even if it means I pay more.

But there is no option to pay more to get a better view for the crowds wanting and desiring to hear and see Jesus. No VIP. No first class. It's standing room only. Floor and pit only.

The crowds' vision of Jesus wasn't clear. Most were probably on their tip toes. Uncomfortable with people on top of each other.

And, yet, this is where Jesus meets the people. This is the backdrop of Jesus' proclamation of the good news about blessings and woes. Luke's version of the beatitudes.

It happens not on a mountainside. It happens on a level place. A plain.

Move 3: Scripture

In Jesus' teaching, Jesus gives us a dichotomy between those who are blessed and those for whom Jesus has woe.

According to Jesus, the blessed are the poor, hungry, weeping, and excluded. And woe to those who are rich, full, laughing, and popular.

The natural tendency is to feel we have to choose. But this passage is not about us choosing between being on the woeful side or blessed side. This is Jesus revealing something new is happening. Now and in the future.

Jesus promises reversal. He says to those then—and to us now—weeping, exclusion, hunger, and poverty are not permanent. They are temporary. They are not ways of

God's Kingdom. They are defects of this world. They are results of our fallen humanity. Not a part of God's design in the beginning, now, or in our future home in heaven.

"Blessed" in this context does not mean divinely favored. Nor does it mean absent of struggle. Being blessed is about awareness. Recognition that we are people always moving toward God and God's Kingdom. [1]

Those who are blessed are blessed because they hear Jesus' promise of reversal and know that these injustices and struggles will cease. Those who are blessed work alongside Jesus to make this a present reality and know that it will be fulfilled on the last day. [2]

For too many years, we've simplified and reduced this text to say that the rich and laughing in this world will receive theirs. Don't be that. But, the truth is, money is neutral. It's not bad. It's not good. It is. Laughing is a good thing. I pray that we can laugh at ourselves and be joyful in our service to the Lord. Being full is fine, too. Treating ourselves and our loved ones in a while. Like a nice dinner on Valentine's Day. Or a spa day to decompress a stressful time. We shouldn't feel guilty about this.

What Jesus is speaking against is hearts set only on self. Hearts set only on climbing the ladder for one's own sake. Woe to those who care only for things of this world that benefit self.

Life with Jesus does entail money. It does entail meals like our "Bringing Hope" dinner. It does entail laughing. The question we need to ask ourselves is this: "How are we connecting our money to mission? How are we breaking bread with each other and opening our doors to break bread with the stranger? How is our joyful spirit lifting up others who are struggling?"

To me, that's Jesus' point. He is not condemning the rich. Nor is he saying those who are poor, just "take it" because your reward will be great in heaven.

This passage has equally been misused in a way to keep struggling people, struggling. To keep the poor, poor. To keep the hungry, hungry.

Blessedness is more than a promise of reversal for the future. In every worship service, we pray "Your Kingdom Come." It is our unified proclamation that we, as God's church and community, participate in joining Christ to make this promise a reality. Right now. Making the Kingdom of God realized. [3]

That's what Jesus wants us of: Changed lives. Changed communities. Not just *waiting* for it to happen and become realized in heaven, in the future, but here and now.

But the important thing to remember is that we don't heed the call to help the poor, weeping, excluded, and hungry out of guilt, shame, or fear of eternal punishment. We do so because we know the battle is already won. We acknowledge what Christ did for us and on our behalf. Despite our tendency sometimes to be woeful, Jesus still chose the cross. Chose us. And in doing so, gives us new life.

We respond out of that grace. We give out of gratitude. And we join. Participate in continuing Jesus' hard ministry. Proclaiming that countercultural message. Working to turn the world upside down.

Move 4: Level Plain

Honestly, there is nothing more upside down thinking than having the "level plain" perspective.

For whatever reason, while praying upon and reflecting on this passage this week, this small detail, this short phrase, kept popping up: Level place. Jesus meeting the people on a level place.

I hear Jesus calling us to have that perspective and mentality in how we engage the community and participate in Christian life.

It is uncommon. It is countercultural. Because, truth is, we don't want to be on level playing field. We want to be ahead or above. Not behind or below.

It makes no sense for us to stand on the same level as someone we or society has deemed lesser. It's just not how this world works. And, yet, it's exactly how God's Kingdom works and operates. [4]

When I think of all the family car trips we took growing up, I remember always complaining about driving through states like Nebraska, Indiana, southern Illinois. They were boring. Plains and fields. I loved driving in the mountains of Colorado and Tennessee.

Right, we love the mountains. The valleys.

We have that tendency in how we see the world and others. We would much rather be on top looking downward than on the bottom looking upward.

Hear Jesus today. He doesn't want us to look down or look up, to stay on the mountain or in the valley. Jesus wants us, and asks us, to be on the level plain. Not on a hill looking down on others. Nor looking up, in shame, thinking we are not enough or worthy. [5]

In God's Kingdom, there are no higher places and lower places. There is no shame or pride. There is just love. Love of others. Love of self. Same love.

Move 5: Aurora Shooting

All of us this weekend have been processing the senseless act of violence that occurred in Aurora. Yet another tragedy. Yet another instance of gun violence.

All of us have heard about these tragedies happening. But we were unconsciously, or consciously, able to keep them at arms' reach. Protecting ourselves from having to admit it could happen to us. Never thinking it would happen in our hometown.

I continue to feel the weight of Friday. Waking up, it's still all heavy. Aurora is our home. It is horrifying to know that our fellow Aurorans were in danger and innocent lives were lost due to yet another instance of gun violence in our country.

How could this happen here?

We saw our mayor speak with deep sorrow. We saw our police chief address the media calmly, as she herself was struggling due to the injuries to her fellow officers.

During this tough and tragic time, we feel deeply. For the six who died. For the six officers who were injured.

And, in the midst of our heavy emotions, we pause to give thanks. To the first responders who risked danger and ran toward the gunfire to protect the innocent. Thank you to the Aurora Police Department, to the Aurora Fire Department, and to the men and women of Aurora Police 911 Dispatch. We give thanks for their bravery.

This tragedy in particular hits home for me. I was finishing up my sermon when I heard helicopters out my window. Odd. Then the texts and phone calls started to come in. Our church had to be put on lockdown. Our Child Development Center where my three- and one-year old-attend day care was on lockdown.

I am angry. My heart aches for the innocent lives lost. Yet, over these last hours, I am turning that anger into justice anger. Turning again to God.

Not knowing what to do, but knowing I can't do it alone. This tragedy can't be solved alone, nor by a committee.

All the emotions will not be wrapped up and finished by the end of tomorrow's prayer vigil.

Yet I am not destroyed. I am down but not destroyed. And it's because I'm reminded of our Savior Jesus. I'm reminded of Jesus' order for how he engages the hard ministry and hard issues: Start in prayer. Come together as community. Engage.

Before we run, we pray. Before we engage, we encourage and build up one another. But we don't stay there.

We engage. We are called to engage our fellow Aurorans. Not out of fear. Not to gain members of the church. Not out of obligation. But because we know God is already meeting people on their level. Where they are. And bringing them into his embrace.

Aurora is weeping. We proclaim Christ has promised reversal. That he is working to end violence. Evil. Death.

Blessed doesn't mean easy. It doesn't mean absent of struggle. Blessed knows that now and in our future God will bring an end to the weeping. It's an unfortunate reality but not our end. Hope for new life now and forever is what we cling to this weekend.

We have a long road as a city to recover, but we are strong and we are resilient. We are Aurora: The City of Lights!

Hate will not win. Evil will not destroy us. Love will prevail. We will rise out of this.

The home we love. The community we serve. We will not be broken or let one act of violence deter or define us. We are Aurora Strong. We stand united and join in solidarity with the victims and their loved ones.

St Mark's takes seriously our call to serve Aurora. We step into the dark and shadow places knowing God is already in those places providing hope and healing.

Amen.

Resources

[1] Allen, Ron. "Commentary on Luke 6:17-26," workingpreacher.org, February 17, 2019.

[2] Loader, William. "First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary: Epiphany 6," TextWeek.com, February 17, 2019.

[3] Loader, William. "First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary: Epiphany 6."

[4] Lewis, Karoline. "A Level Plain Perspective," DearWorkingPreacher, workingpreacher.org, February 11, 2019.

[5] Lewis, Karoline. "A Level Plain Perspective."

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Reflection Questions

- *What does it mean to be blessed?*
- *If blessedness is more than a promise of the future, how do we bring change and help make the Realm of God realized in the present?*
- *We, as people, have a tendency to not want to stand on the same level as others. Why is it difficult to view self and others on even, level ground?*