

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 11, 2007

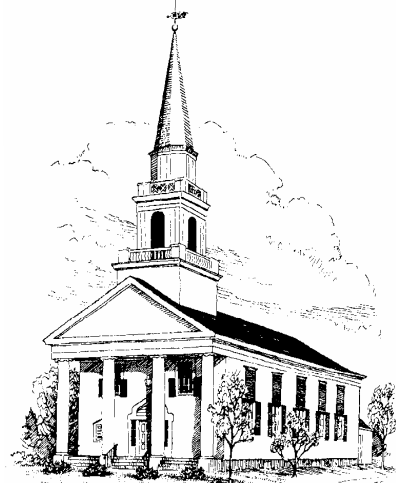
Rev. Patricia L. Liberty

“The Way of Blessing”

Scriptures:

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Luke 6:17-26



I never display bumper stickers on my car but if you see my study, you will see that my bulletin board is pretty much littered with bumper stickers everywhere. One of my current favorites is, “I had a handle on things but it broke.” It fairly well sums up my week.

There are those moments when you sort of think that, maybe, you’re starting to get a handle on things but you have some things figured out that you have a clear fix on whatever it is that’s going on and things turn out to be somewhat different from what you’ve predicted. It doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t look to the future. It only means that, perhaps, you shouldn’t assume that all of the information that you have is all the information that there is.

This simple fact is very clearly illustrated in today’s gospel. Jesus takes some basic assumptions commonly held by people in his time and, even to some extent, today and turns them utterly upside down. The passage in Luke is often called *The Sermon On the Plain* in contrast with its parallel passage in Matthew called *The Sermon On the Mount*.

Matthew tells of Jesus scaling(?) up a mountain to get away from the crowd and to teach them. Luke tells us that Jesus came down the mountain in order to be in the midst of the crowd. The gospels as a whole are not much on giving stage directions. So when little comments are made about where things take place, it’s important to take notice.

Matthew was one who wanted to keep Jesus connected to his Jewish heritage so he oftentimes had Jesus preaching and speaking from the mountain top. It was a place of authority that kept him connected to Moses. Luke, on the other hand, saw Jesus as a great healer so having him come down from the mountain on to the level ground is important because it meant that everyone in the crowd could get a glimpse or a touch or a look from Jesus. The crowd wasn’t just filled with his followers and people who already got it. It was also dotted with the faithful and the fearful, seekers and skeptics alike, people who came because they were hungry and not necessarily for food. Jesus came down from the mountain where he had been praying all night and just waded indiscriminately out into the crowd, blessing everyone who showed up.

As we read in Matthew, Jesus uttered eight statements that begin with “Blessed are ...”

Luke has Jesus utter only four and he counters that with four that begin with “Woe to you ...” It was this familiar way of speaking in Ancient Palestine. The beatitude “Blessed are ...” was a form of speech that was like common wisdom. It maybe something we’d say like, “Blessed are those who watch their cholesterol for they have less chance of a heart attack” or “Blessed are those who can laugh at themselves for they shall never cease to be amused.” Lazslo offered one after the eight o’clock service, “Blessed are those who expect nothing for they shall never be disappointed.”

It was a common sort of wisdom, this form of speech. The content that Jesus offered, however, was of a completely different ilk. The Greek word for *blessed* had been through some changes in a similar way that our language changes and some of the words that meant things fifty years ago don’t mean the same things today. Well, *blessed* was a word that had been through a series of changes. In ancient times, *blessed* referred only to the gods; they were the only ones who were blessed. They had achieved a state of happiness and contentment which was beyond all earthly care. They lived out there in some other world. It was commonly believed that to be *blessed* you needed to be a god.

The word took on a second meaning as time went on and referred to the dead. The blessed ones were human beings who, in dying, had reached the other world of the gods. They, too, were now beyond the cares of earthly life. So, to be blessed, you either had to be a god or you had to be dead.

Finally, in Greek usage, the word came to refer to the elite. This is probably the meaning that is closest to how we understand it. We often speak of blessing in terms of what we have and what we possess. In Jesus’ time, it referred to the upper crust of society. Folks who, by the world’s standard, were rich and because of that they were above some of the normal cares and worries of the folks who had to struggle everyday to eke out a meager living.

So, in order to be blessed for Jesus’ years, you had to be a god, you had to be dead, or you had to be rich and powerful. It’s not terribly encouraging given that most of the people of Jesus’ time were very poor. When the Greek translation of Hebrew scripture came along, it took on even yet another time. It referred to the results of righteous living and the fruit of righteous living was teemed in material blessings. People believed that if good stuff was happening in their life, it was because God looked favorably on them. In a patriarchal society, it meaning that you had a good wife and lots of kids, your crops never failed, and you had riches. A *blessed* person was one who had more stuff.

But Jesus turned that whole notion pretty much upside down. He wasn’t necessarily talking to people who lived the first-century equivalent of the jet-set life. Rather, what Jesus said was that God’s favor and blessing rested on the ones that the world had forgotten, the kind of people who were, for the most part, gathered right there in front of him, pressing in from every side. Just to make sure that folks didn’t miss the point, he eloquently stated everything in counterpoint by pronouncing “woes” to those who consistently munched from the upper crust. In the beatitudes, he made the bad stuff sound good and in the “woe-itudes” (which I like to call them), he made the good stuff sound bad.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “We’re so used to hearing them by now that it’s hard for us to get a sense of their original shock value.” Perhaps if I said, “Blessed are you who suffer from cancer, for you shall be made whole” or “Blessed are you whose prayers are not answered, for you shall see the face of God”, it might make more sense. Perhaps if I said, “Woe to you who drive new cars for you shall walk on foot” or “Woe to you with college degrees for you have received your reward”. It all kind of depends on where you sit in the listening. If you happen to be one of the hungry people, then what Jesus is saying sounds like good news. If you happen to be one of the well-fed folks, then it can sound a bit like bad news. It’s all a matter of perspective and it all comes very close to the heart of the gospel.

It isn’t that Jesus necessarily loved those who had stuff more than he loved anybody else. It’s just that he loved the people who didn’t have anything as much as he loved everybody else. God doesn’t regard wealth, happiness and popularity as signs of goodness, nor does God permit them to be factors that entitle anyone to citizenship in the kingdom. Rather, Jesus tells the crowd gathered that God is reaching to every human being and will enfold them all in an embrace of love and care, no matter what: each one, all the time, ever equal.

So, imagine the surprise of those gathered who thought that God couldn’t care less about them because they didn’t have two denari to clink together. Imagine the surprise of those who thought they were on God’s A-list because their bank accounts were bulging.

Nearly two thousand years later, we still may struggle a bit with what that passage means because, by the world’s standards, we do fall off on the rich end of things. If we came to church hungry this morning, it isn’t because our cupboards were empty but because we didn’t take the time to eat or if you’re like me, even after thirty years of preaching, my stomach is doing such flip-flops, I couldn’t eat if my life depended on it.

Barbara Taylor Brown says, “We learn to ignore this passage by putting it in the same file with all the other good Christian advice that no one we know personally has ever really followed.” Here’s the catch: the beatitudes were never intended to be advice. There’s nothing about them that suggests that Jesus is telling anyone what to do. He’s very clear when he was telling people what to do: Do this. Love your enemies. Pray for those who hurt you.” Those things are really clear. He is not telling people what to do. He is just saying that there are different kinds of people in the world. The hope was that maybe his listeners would recognize themselves in one way or another in reminding them that the way things are is not the way that they’re always going to be.

It was never intended to be judgment. It was simply intended to be perspective. It is a truth, and an invitation for us to see things differently. It’s simply a message about how God sees life, the world, us, and how we might see each other. I guess in that way, it’s a pretty good move. It’s illustrated as oftentimes comes, at least for me, in children. Not unlike what we saw witnessed this morning as children read scriptures about love.

So I share with you this story in closing. There was a group of students who were asked to list what they thought were the present wonders of the world. Though there were some disagreements, they finally agreed on these things: Egypt’s Great Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the

Grand Canyon, Panama Canal, the Empire State Building, St. Peter's Basilica, and the Great Wall of China.

While gathering the votes, the teacher noted that one student had not finished her paper yet. So she asked the girl if she was having trouble with her list.

The girl said, "A little. I couldn't quite make up my mind. There are so many."

The teacher said, "Well, tell us what you have and, maybe, we can help."

The girl hesitated and then said, "I think the seven wonders of the world are: to sing, to touch, to hear, to taste, to feel, to laugh, to love."

That is that blessedness about which Jesus spoke. It is available to all of us. It depends not whether we walk to church or rode in a new car. It has less to do with what we have than it does with who we see ourselves to be in God's eyes. It is the way of blessedness and we find our way to it one step at a time. Amen.