

Sermon Title: What Manner of Blessing
Text: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

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You learn early on in parenting that a Band-Aid is an enormously powerful thing. I know I'm not the only one who has searched an extended finger or elbow in vain for some slight scratch that would justify the sobbing until finally giving in, I hopped off to the medicine chest to find one of those magic adhesive strips that, with a pat and a kiss, can make it "all better."

It's harder, I suppose, as you grow up. Because it is often the unseen bumps and bruises of life that hurt the most. And it's made all the harder by a world that too often wants to put that Band-Aid on your elbow instead of allowing you the time, space, freedom to consider the cries of your soul, and figure out where it is that you really hurt.

When we step inside the walls of the church, I call it "the covenant of niceness"—a tendency to want things to be *all right* with the world, and to set aside the unpleasant or the difficult, or the painful. Karl Marx understood it. That sort of religion that easily becomes the opiate, masking the real pains of the world by goading believers to endure their suffering with a promise of eternal reward. But then if the opiate doesn't kill you, what it's masking will. There is great damage we can do to each other if we are not honest about our pain.

It is helpful, then, to realize that if you look at the life of Jesus, it was not that way. Though contradicted by the soft pictures that lined my Sunday School rooms while I was growing up, the story of Jesus' life was *not* one that sought to evade life's trials, but one that marched right into the middle of them, knowing that it was where you touch the world's deepest suffering that the healing can finally begin.

Our Gospel reading for this morning is a case in point. If you have a picture of the beatitudes in your mind, I suspect, it looks like those images in our Sunday School rooms. It's a fresh scrubbed, beaming Jesus, surrounded by intent apostles sitting high up on a hill, with the valley below crowded with an admiring throng.

It's Matthew's version that sings in our heads: "Blessed are the poor in Spirit," "blessed are the meek", "blessed are the pure in heart." They read almost like a textbook of the most holy of believers—what we all should aspire to if we are to truly be faithful. Sure there are a few troubling ones, "blessed are you who mourn," "blessed are those who are persecuted" but no one ever promised you a rose garden, and we all know that sometimes it is in the heart of sadness and trial that we discover our true strength. *Matthew's* version is not exactly *easy* but it is palatable. It is something to which we might aim in the pilgrimage of our living.

But it is not Matthew's version that the lectionary lifted up for us this morning, and it's a telling trace of how different these Gospels are, which we too often tend to put in a blender and puree until they're a nice, smooth, but ultimately tasteless mush. What Luke presents is literally a different *landscape*. Jesus doesn't go up the mountain to get away from the crowd; he came down to a level place, and stood right in the middle of it all. It's not his disciples who are calmly gathered at his feet ready for the sermon to begin, but a multitude who had heard of Jesus'

power, and come to him seeking healing, longing just to touch him in order to find peace from the demons that tormented them. There's an electricity to it all, that is (in a very strange sentence found only in Luke) discharged into that crowd. "Power came out from him and he healed all of them!"

And it's then, looking up at the disciples from the vortex of suffering and healing, that the words are—I'm really not sure...are they shouted, or are they whispered?—"These pitiful folk are blessed. The kingdom *belongs* to them. They are blessed in their hunger...they 'll be made full! They are blessed in their tears...because the psalms have promised it: those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy!" There is nothing abstract, or romantic about Jesus' words. They describe the brutal reality of this crowd that surrounds him: those who were hated, and excluded, and reviled, and defamed because they dared to believe. But he turns the world on end. *These* are the blessed.

To understand, just listen to the part that is nowhere to be found in Matthew's version, and frankly not something we like to think about as a part of our favorite Jesus, as his gracious compassion for the hurting crowd is turned like a fire hose on the righteous ones who were nowhere to be found. Woe to you who are rich...you who are full, you who are laughing, you with stellar reputations. Woe to you.

Just try this little mental test. Which would *you* prefer: to be poor, hungry, weeping, and despised, or rich, full, laughing and respected? No contest, right? Any of you come to church this morning hoping you could learn how to be just a little poorer, hungrier, sadder, more of a cast out in your world? I doubt it. I suppose we're past the days when coming to church is a good business decision, where you can see and be seen, but the good old Protestant Work Ethic runs pretty deep, and I imagine we *do* think that if we follow the golden rule it certainly won't hurt us in the bottom line. Full is not the problem for most of us. But I certainly feel the pressure to leave 'em laughing—to make our worship *uplifting* and joyful. And I doubt that there's a message any of us long for more dearly than to be told that we fit in—that we're good people in the end, and should be proud of ourselves. It's the *woes* that we long for, that we would count as our blessings. But who does Jesus call *blessed*?

Have I got you thinking? A word of caution is called for here. Some of you know that in preparation for my last Pastor Theologian conversation I did some rummaging around in the earliest monastic traditions—the Rule of St. Benedict, and the orders that emerged in the region of Rome and Italy when the Roman Empire was fading and the dark ages were creeping across Europe. There's a lot that I think these communities got right, but the thing that troubled me as I tried to think my way into the world of the monastic was how these woes of Luke's beatitudes can almost be seen as the template of their life together.

They adopted the strictest disciplines of personal poverty. They could own *nothing* for themselves. Not even a letter from the homes they left behind, or a drawing of the face of a loved one. Gluttony was punished, and eating was understood fundamentally to be a common discipline, not a time of celebration and good cheer. But the part I found hardest about Benedict's rule was how deeply suspicious he was of laughter. There was to be no joking, no hilarity. I wouldn't have lasted a week!

The danger is that as I read Luke's version of the beatitudes, the point is not to change out one set of behaviors for another—stop laughing and start crying, give up your riches and live poor, trade in your reputation and live as one excluded. Rather what I hear as I listen to Jesus crying out to his disciples from this deep point of humanity is that the blessing for which we long is fundamentally linked to the healing we need. The problem is that we want that Band-Aid on our elbow when it's our souls that hurt. We want a kiss on the knee, but it's a gnawing emptiness that separates us from ourselves, from each other, from God's healing presence. The virtue of that teeming multitude was not that they were so miserable, but that they knew and had named their hurt in such a way that the power of Jesus' healing could move in them.

What lies at the heart of Jesus' fearsome "woes" I hear as a whisper of true compassion: "If you can do it for yourself, you don't need me!" If you're wealthy, satisfied, joyful, honored, what need do you have for healing? The blessing God has to offer to you is not found where you want to put the Band-Aid. Your blessing is where you hurt the most.

It's all just a little twist on what Jeremiah saw so clearly, and if you were listening you heard the echoes as his prophecy was read. "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals, or make mere flesh their strength"... "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust *is* the Lord!" And Jeremiah illustrates with an image that will resurface in Jesus' teaching in the parable of the sower who went out to sow. As you look for sustenance in this world, where are you going to put down your roots? Will you put down shallow roots in the sand, or deep roots by the river? Will you seek God's blessing where you want it, or where you *need* it?

It's an image I understand when I look out the window into my backyard. Off to the right, near the house, is a yew that we planted just this past Summer. We put it just where we wanted it, in order to provide a nice visual block from our neighbor's backyard, and a pleasant backdrop to the perennials we'd planted in front of it. We watched with some sadness as that bush grew more and more yellow as the year went on. I suspect one of the first projects for next year will be pulling up the remnants and finding something else to put in its place.

At the back of the yard, on the street, is an oak tree that the seller of our house had proudly claimed was the second oldest oak tree in Appleton. It has been ravaged by the years. A few years back a third of the tree literally fell off, leaving a terrible gash. And yet that tree endures. If I could, I'd move it back a few feet, maybe a little more toward the center of the yard, but to do so would, of course, kill it.

Whenever I take the time to think about it while I'm sipping my coffee I'm reminded that one of the hardest things of living a faithful life is growing where you are planted, and not wishing you were something, or someone, or somewhere else, where you'd get the respect, attention, reward you deserve.

What was it about that poor, hungry, wretched, despised crowd that was literally sucking the life force from Jesus that possessed him to shout out, "Blessed!"? In their poverty, and hunger, in their sorrow and forsakenness, they knew who they were, where they hurt, and *there*, Jesus knew, the Spirit could begin to spark, and burn, and kindle real life within them.

What's the moral of the story? Get thee to a nunnery? Forsake all, and be miserable so that in some glorious by and by you can inherit the wind? Truth be told, Jesus doesn't have much time for stories with morals. He preferred points, and especially points that turned the world on its edge. And the point, I believe, is that the God of all creation wants desperately for this world to be healed...so desperately that He entered this world, precisely at the point of its greatest need, in order to begin the work of its redemption. Right at the roots of its deepest pain, because it's at the roots that real healing begins.

It's a healing that's available to *you*...to *us*. But we'll never find it so long as we say, "put the Band-aid here, Jesus!" We'll find it when we step into that crowd, there in the great leveling place, and say, "heal me Jesus, as only *you* know how."

It's *there* that we will find our blessing.

Let us pray.