

**The Sermon on the Plain**  
**Luke 6:17-26**  
**Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**February 13, 2022**

I find it interesting, even somewhat curious, that people are generally aware that Jesus preached a sermon we generally call The Sermon on the Mount. It is among the most important preaching we have from this most important preacher, and it includes some of the things we really like that Jesus said. Some of it we like well enough to have a separate name, The Beatitudes. These are sayings attributed to Jesus, and in particular eight blessings recounted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Each is a proverb-like proclamation, without narrative, standing on their own.

We also get Beatitudes here in Luke, but with some significant differences. For one thing, we get half as many beatitudes, just four. For another, these are immediately followed by four woes, structured to mirror the blessings. The most common translation is “woe,” which sounds like a cursing or a denunciation, but it’s a little more accurate to say that these are pronouncements, meaning that this is Jesus calling it as he sees it, describing what it is like to live as one of God’s people, or as one living apart from God. In fact, this difference from common translation applies to the good parts, as well. You should probably hear those words of blessing less like a happy day, and more like living in a condition of honor. Remember the culture of the day. Whether you were happy was a lot less important than whether you were living in a condition of shame or of honor.

In a few minutes I’m going to share with you the translation from the Message version, translated by Fred Craddock, which is less of a proper translation and more of a paraphrase. When we translate scripture, the general task is to get the meaning of each word as closely as possible, while preserving the overall meaning and intent of the full text. When you have something like The Message, there is much less focus on the individual words, and much greater focus on preserving the sense and intent of the full passage, and because of this often shifting to sound like more contemporary language. That’s what you have in this case. I didn’t ask Ken to read this version for us, because I think there is some value in hearing the words in a more familiar phrasing. But being able to compare those familiar words with some words that have been phrased in an unfamiliar way, I think the comparison both helps you connect with these words, as well as see them in a new light.

There’s something more to consider. If you look at the full chapter 6 in Luke, there are a lot of important things happening. For one, Jesus and his disciples have just eaten grain on the Sabbath, which isn’t done, and then healed a man with a withered hand, also

healing on the Sabbath, also not done. Both of these were witnessed by his enemies, both of these required Jesus to explain himself, and he did it in a way that my NRSV says “filled them with fury”.

After going to a mountain to pray, he chooses his 12 disciples. Then he comes down from the mountain, to a plain, where a great multitude waits for him, from Judea and Jerusalem — you’ve probably heard of these — and also from Tyre and Sidon, which aren’t as well known in our modern day. If you check a map, they are very far away, barely on the map, far north. In Matthew, Tyre and Sidon are referred to as terrible cities, places that deserve destruction. And yet all are gathered to learn from Jesus, and to be healed by Jesus. That seems important. The scripture says that power is going out from him, such that he is healing everyone. That seems important as well — they aren’t doing anything to deserve his healing, they are simply healed by his very presence. And when he begins to speak, the scripture is very specific that he looks at his disciples — so the words he speaks are addressed specifically to them. That’s the set up.

I think that is also important. Just a few verses earlier, these people were selected by him and named by him as apostles. I bet that felt pretty good — you are following this man around, trying to learn from him, to see what he does, and just as he is getting some notoriety, he specifically calls you into his inner circle. And then he locks eyes with you, and:

*Then he spoke: You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding. You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal. You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning."Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens - skip like a lamb, if you like! - for even though they don't like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this. Give Away Your Life.*

*But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get. And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it. "There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests - look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.*

In my research I came across an observation from Theologian David Ewart, a reminder to remember who this is written for: Theophilus. Remember, we are reading and

hearing a dramatic story, but these words were written by a human being, and at the beginning of the whole thing, Luke chapter 1, that writer addresses his patron, for whom this account is written, and who is named Theophilus. That is all we know about the intended reader of these words.

Theophilus is the name or honorary title of the person to whom the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are addressed. The name Theophilus as used here means friend of God or (be)loved by God or loving God in the Greek language. This was both a common name and an honorary title among academic Romans and Jews of the era. In my research, I learned that John Wesley recorded that Theophilus was "a person of eminent quality at Alexandria", which he understood to be the tradition 'of the ancients' in his Notes on the New Testament. Even so, we don't know if this was a real person, or a title.

What's my point? My point is this: Theophilus is not poor or weeping. Presumably, this would be a rich man who had some social standing. Luke is reminding Theophilus (through Jesus' words) that following Jesus is going to be costly.

I have some thoughts on why the sermon on the mount is so well known, while the sermon on the plain is much less known. Two reasons — for one, take a look back at the sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew. In Matthew 5 verse 3, it begins, Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Compare that to Luke 6:20, where it begins Blessed are you who are poor, and next addresses blessed are you who are hungry. If we just stick with Matthew, it is simple for us to say that Jesus is talking about the spiritually poor, meaning we must attend to them spiritually.

If we read Luke, it focuses on the actual hardship, poverty, marginalization and rejection of the poor who will see eventual vindication. Here, it seems pretty clear Jesus is talking about ministry to actual poor people, and not spiritual poverty. **This text requires a lot more of us.** It also reminds the reader that following Jesus is going to be costly. "Poor in spirit" has a lot more worth talking about, but that's for another day.

Also, if Theophilus means beloved by God, then this text is speaking to us directly. This is a message for those who are loved by God, and in it Jesus addresses those who would commit to following him directly. **I am very comfortable describing all of you as people who are beloved by God, and whom God considers as a friend.** That's the second reason we may prefer the sermon on the mount — half of what is said here are woes, and many of us are a lot more comfortable with the Jesus of the Beatitudes than we are with the Jesus of the Woes. As Luke would state it, they are inseparable.

To be fair, this is the beginning of the sermon, not it in its entirety. The rest of Luke 6 keeps going with this famous sermon, and we'll pick up where we left off next week. Next week talks a lot about love, in fact, so that would have been a good one for this Sunday

just before Valentine's Day — but then again, perhaps that reminds us that showing love for other people shouldn't be restricted to a particular day, or restricted at all, really.

Since I made mention to the other famous list of beatitudes, I'm going to wrap up with a few more. During my research, I came across six suggested modern Beatitudes as written by Pope Francis:

1. Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted on them by others and forgive them from their heart
2. Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalized and show them their closeness
3. Blessed are those who see God in every person and strive to make others also discover Him
4. Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home
5. Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others
6. Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between Christians.

Lord, give us the courage to go and do likewise.

Amen.