

February 14, 2010  
Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Cycle C

Twelve years ago I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. One of my great curiosities was how the land itself would match up with the bible stories I have read about it. How much of Jerusalem could you see from Mount of Olives? Was the Jordan a river or just a creek? So you can imagine my curiosity as we piled onto a bus to go to Tiberius, where legend holds that Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, according to the gospel of St. Matthew, or the Sermon on the Plain according to St. Luke. You see the problem.

I have read enough to know that each of the gospel writers chose his geography for a reason. By putting Jesus on a mountain, St. Matthew wanted us to think of Moses on Mount Sinai. As Moses gave the Law to Israel from on high, so Jesus gave the gospel from on high as well. By putting Jesus on a plain, St. Luke wanted us to see how accessible Jesus was---not above but among the people to whom he spoke. Both of those made sense to me, but the problem

remained. How was the land going to reflect on those two accounts?

As soon as the bus pulled into the parking lot, I knew. There was a high hill with a chapel on top called the chapel of the Beatitudes.

From there was a long sloping hillside that went all the way down to the lake. The hollow of that hill side created a kind of amphitheater---a fine, flat place with hills all around it to bounce the sound back: a mount and a plain all rolled into one.

Now according to St. Luke, Jesus had just spent all night on the mountain praying. Then he came down and stood on the flat part, surrounded by people from all over the place. Some of them were already sold on Jesus and others were still trying to figure him out but they all wanted something from him.

There were a lot of sick folks in the crowd, Luke tells us. There were a lot of people with crazy looks in their eyes and others who clearly had not eaten for a while. They had heard about Jesus' power---about all you had to do was get near him and the demons

would fly right out of you. If you had a fever, he could make it go away, and if your leg didn't work right he could fix that too.

If you could just manage to get his attention, then there was no telling what might happen to you. Some even said he could help you set your business straight. There was a story going around that he had walked up to a local fisherman, Simon, who had nothing to show for a whole night's work. When Jesus told him to go into the deep water, and he did what Jesus told him to do, he caught more fish than his nets could handle. There was apparently nothing Jesus could not do. To make contact with him was the first century equivalent of winning the lottery, or at least that was the word going around.

It was why they were all trying to touch him, which made it even more remarkable that he remained down there on the plain, where they could all get at him---patting him, pulling on his clothes, grabbing his arms and poking at him. Anyone else would have hired some body-guards, but Jesus didn't seem to mind, or if he minded he did not let that stop him from offering himself to all

those people. Some of them were really hurting and some of them were just plain greedy, but he didn't discriminate among them. He stood among them instead, preaching a silent sermon to them with his presence before he ever opened his mouth to say a word.

But then he did open his mouth, and what came out were the beatitudes---a series of blessings he pronounced on those who were there. The form of speech he used was a common one. Beatitudes are short, two-part affirmations that sum up common knowledge about the good life. "Blessed are they who have intact 401K plans, for their old age shall be comfortable." "Blessed are they who floss, for they shall keep their teeth." That sort of thing.

So the *form* of what Jesus said was familiar to his hearers. He said, "Blessed are..." and they all got ready for some nuggets of wisdom. But the *content* of what he said rocked them back on their heels. Blessed are..." you who are poor?...who are hungry?...who weep now? Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the son of Man...?

Hearing this was like drinking from a glass of what looked like lemonade and finding out it was bug spray instead. It was a shocking substitution of bad things for good things, in which blessedness was equated with the very things people did their best to avoid---poverty, hunger, grief, hatred. In every case, Jesus made those equations even stronger by tacking a reversal of fortune onto them. “Blessed are you who are poor.” He said, “For yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”

In Matthew’s gospel, there are nine of these beatitudes. In Luke’s gospel there are only four, plus four “woeitudes” that only St. Luke seemed to know about. These were mirror images of the beatitudes, in which woe was equated with things that people did their best to achieve---wealth, food, laughter, esteem. In the same way that Jesus made the bad things sound good, he made the good things sound bad. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for your will be hungry.”

Since we are used to hearing them by now, 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 God face to face." 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."

As you may be able to tell from your reactions to these statements, the impact of the beatitudes has everything to do with who you are. If you happen to be one of the hungry people, then what Jesus is saying sounds like pretty good news. If you happen to be one of the well-fed people, then it sounds like bad news. The words themselves do not change, mind you. They simply sound different depending on who happens to be hearing them.

I think it is fair to say that most of us hear them from the well-fed end of the spectrum. Not many of us walked here today, and if our stomachs are growling it is not because our cupboards are bare.

Most of us are rich, by global standards, and some of us are

fabulously so. Many of us have worked hard in hopes that people would speak well of us, and when they do not, we take it as a sign that we still have more work to do.

What that means, I'm afraid, is that many of us hear the beatitudes and take the high dive into a deep tank of guilt. Not many of us sell what we own and give over the proceeds to the poor, I have noticed, but at least we feel bad about what we have. Or else we learn to ignore this passage by putting it into the same file with all the other good Christian advice that no one we know personally has ever followed.

The catch is, the beatitudes were not advice. There is nothing about them that remotely suggests Jesus was telling anyone what he thought they should do. When Jesus is giving advice, it's hard to miss. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Now *that's* advice----love, do good, pray, bless---one imperative after another, with no distinction between rich or poor, hungry or well fed. It's

the same list for all of them, whether they happen to be weeping or bent over with laughter.

The beatitudes are not like that. In them Jesus does not tell anyone to do anything. Instead, he describes different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. The Ferris wheel will go around, so that those who are swaying on the top, with the wind in their hair and all the world's lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down there now, where all they can see are the candy wrappers in the dirt, will have their chance to touch the stars. It's not advice or judgment, just the truth about how things work pronounced by one who loves them all.

I think it is the blessing and woe language that trips us up on this passage from the gospels. Whenever we hear words such as "blessing" or "woe," we think "reward" and "punishment." The blessing things must be what he wants us to do and the woe thing

must be what he wants us not to do, only where does that leave you, exactly? Finding some reason to sit down and sob in hopes that you can move from one list to another? Doing your best to ruin your reputation so no one will speak well of you? Blessings and woes cannot be manipulated like that. The beatitudes do not tell us what not to do. They tell us who we are, and more importantly, they tell us who Jesus is.

When he first said to them out loud, everyone heard them in a different way, depending on who they were. Jesus never said who was who. He let them all sort themselves out, but after they had done that, there was no mistaking what Jesus was good for and what he was not.

Anyone who was there that day to win the lottery could go on home. Even if they managed to nab a little bit of his power, it would not help them to get on top and stay on top. Jesus wasn't any good for that. In fact, people who were attached to that were in for some woes, because the way things are is not the way they will always be, and no one gets to stay at the top of the ferris wheel

forever. What goes around, comes around. That is not advice. It's not even judgment. It is God's own truth. It is pure blessedness for those on the bottom who never really expected to get off the ground.

Although Luke does not say so, I believe it is also pure blessedness for those on top, because there are some vitally important things about human life on earth that you simply cannot see with your feet so far off the ground. To get a good look at them you have to come down, as Jesus did, from the mountain to the plain. Things may not look as pretty from down there. You may see some things that make you cry, but your grief may teach you more than your good fortune ever did.

Neither the going up nor the coming down is under our control, as far as I can tell, but wherever we happen to be, the promise is the same. Blessed are you who loose your grip on the ways things are, for God shall lead you in the way things shall be.