

# “Plain Talk”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – February 14, 2010*

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 1

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 6:17-26

Imagine, if you can, the crowd that gathered around Jesus that day. We’re told that people had come from near and far, from both Jewish and Gentile lands. Jesus had just completed the selection of his twelve disciples and they are there in the audience that day, possibly sitting in the front row. But we’re told that, among the others, there were people sick in body and spirit; people wanting to be touched and cured. All of them, we hear Luke say, were healed.

While in Matthew, Jesus teaches on a mountain or from a boat docked next to the shore, in Luke, Jesus is on the level. He is looking his listeners right in the eye. And he is speaking not just on the plain, but also plainly. We can trust that Jesus will be on the level with us, speaking the truth of what God expects of us.

And yet, these words are addressed specifically to the disciples and not to the whole of the crowd. Therefore, in our hearing, Jesus is speaking to the church, and not to the world. The Sermon on the Plain is a call to the life of discipleship. The life of faith is so difficult precisely because there is no avoiding each person’s measure of individual responsibility.

The Greek word *beatitude* is most often translated *blessed*, although a number of other viable possibilities exist, including *happy*, *fortunate*, or even *blissful*. But, to be *blessed* means something even more: it indicates a closeness to God; not necessarily that those who are *blessed* have moved towards God, but that God has moved towards them. In the teachings of Jesus, the beatitudes declare that certain people – typically the least likely of candidates – will someday attain a privileged and more fortunate situation. God’s truth is of a radically changed reality; one that is sometimes difficult for us to imagine or accept.

All four declarations of blessing in this passage follow the same basic formula: a statement about the present, followed by a different claim about the future. Jesus does not offer these beatitudes in the form of “if...then” because the truth announced is not conditioned on any response. They express what God is already making true and what life will be like for those who hear the message. But, each of the four blessings are then paired with accompanying woes: blessed are the hungry, but woe to those who already filled; blessed are the poor, but woe to those who are rich and have already received their consolation. Blessed are

those who people hate and exclude, but woe to those who are well-spoken-of, for they typically have what they need, and thus have no need for God.

The point of the text is not – for example – that Jesus loves to hate rich people. The point of this text is that, "The times, they are a changin'." The mighty will be cast down and the lowly lifted up.<sup>1</sup> While announced in the present, the beatitudes speak to a different future; to a God who creates something new in the future; good news to those who have the greatest need. Remember, Luke tells us that Jesus healed all of them.

The gospel says that more than actual possession, our *attitude* toward money can be dangerous. Jesus frequently warned about greed that encouraged people to work not only for what they needed, but for more and more. "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a [person's] life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). Jesus knew that in the amassing of money, people sometimes became obsessed by it. When his followers wondered what was wrong with that, he told them the story of an enterprising man who built silos to store his *extra* grain. Buying (or building) as speculation has always been a risky business, and the inherent anxiety in that kind of gambling investment may well have triggered the coronary, or whatever it was, which unexpectedly brought life's end to this hustler.

Luke's special contribution to our understanding of Jesus is that he redefines salvation as something that begins now, in this world, today.<sup>2</sup> Luke gives special attention to the poor and, of all the New Testament writers, most clearly states that wealth can isolate us from God and from the rest of the human community. But, Luke still does not consider those with wealth to be beyond salvation.

For example, when Jesus visits the home of Zacchaeus and the diminutive tax collector repents of his sinfulness, Jesus says: "today salvation has come to this house...for the Son of Man has come to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:9-10) By righting the wrongs that he has committed, Zacchaeus opens himself up to the power of healing that Jesus has to give, rather than choosing to keep all that he had amassed for himself alone.

When a woman poured expensive ointment over the head of Jesus (Matt. 26:6-13), it was the disciples who calculated the cost and declared the gesture as needless extravagance since, they insisted, the money involved could have been better invested. Jesus, on the other hand, did not reprimand the woman or

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Hinkle Shore, "Riches in the Rule of God" from *PilgrimPreaching.com*

<sup>2</sup> Richard Spencer in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Feb. 2004

condemn the gesture, possibly because he knew that giving with largesse is a form of poverty.<sup>3</sup> Again, wealth is not the issue for Jesus, but salvation rests in the willingness to allow God to be God and money not to take God's place.

It may not appear on the surface that we do many radical things in our corporate worship life here at Valley. We follow a traditional order for worship; and we utilize a lectionary schedule of scripture readings that is common to most mainline denominations. But, one thing distinctive is our use of the affirmation of faith: a congregational response following the word read and proclaimed. Many churches choose to skip this part of the service; others use only the Apostles' or Nicene Creed. Instead, we use a great variety of faith statements – passages from scripture, selections from the Book of Confessions, and even the words of modern prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King.

Every time we profess our faith in God and declare that which we believe, we also proclaim what it is that we reject. We profess that God, through Christ and his followers, is working in the present to create a better future. The truth that Jesus claims is that in the future, the present realities will change. And so, the beatitudes are not just a call to future action and do not merely describe something that already is, but they bring into being the very reality they declare. Blessing is God's to grant, and we are given an integral role as participants in blessedness.

On the first of March, our local Council of Churches will be introducing a new program called "Mindful Mondays." Each of the participating churches will hand out coupons to be used on Mondays at a number of local restaurants who have agreed to take part. And yet, the coupons are not for those dining to receive a discount, but instead for the restaurants to donate ten percent of the bill to go to support local food programs. I'm excited about this because it is not just one congregation's program, but a declaration of faith made by the entire community of churches: an ecumenical statement that we stand beside those who are hungry in our midst. It is a public action, but also a private choice. Nobody will be forced to participate, but anyone can. Those individual diners that do choose to participate will gain nothing, except the opportunity to make a statement about what they believe about God.

The beautiful thing about "Mindful Mondays" is that it will also help out local restaurants generate business on what is traditionally a slow night. In this way, potential layoffs or even closed businesses could be avoided. And those planning this program hope that the idea will spread throughout Northeast Ohio – thus helping to feed more hungry people, helping to support more local

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<sup>3</sup> Doris Donnelly, "The Needle's Eye: Christians and their Money"

restaurants, and helping to give people the opportunity to provide Christian witness through simple acts of blessing.

Our task, then, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is "to be what in the reality of God (we) are already."<sup>4</sup> This means that we are to be people who, out of recognition of our own blessedness, work to impart blessing to others; thus creating the Kingdom of God here on earth. When we are blessed, it is so that we might be a blessing to others. And when we fail to bless others, it proclaims that we have departed from God's side and chosen instead to take care of ourselves, rather than depending on God's salvation.

Our God is the God of those who have nothing but God. Maybe we think that is only means those who are really poor or really hungry. As much as we would like to place ourselves among the blessed, we typically think we must be lumped into those who will have woes. But, with the right attitude, it includes us too, even if our need of God is masked by our comparative prosperity.

Blessedness comes to us when we are right with God; when we recognize our nearness to God. Jesus spoke to his disciples on a level plain, looking them right in the eye and telling the truth about how dangerous the wrong attitude about riches can be. And yet, he was – through his message – able to heal them all; those who needed both physical and spiritual healing; those who hungered in body and spirit as well.

The beatitudes are about a hopeful expectation that God, who participates with us in the present, will create a greater future. This hope does not grow out of what we do or how we act – although what we do is critical – but the hope comes from the power of God. It encourages us to be a part of God's future by following the example of Jesus and living out the new reality he teaches. As we are blessed, we come to know the source of our blessing as we learn to seek God's hope in the places where it can be found.

Perhaps, on this day, we will hear Christ's message and realize that we, too, are a congregation full of people who need Jesus. Maybe that is the fundamental truth that we are to learn about ourselves today. And as we learn about ourselves, maybe we will come to learn more about God, and how we are blessed when we stand by God's side. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> John McClure, *New Proclamation*