

Sermon
March 1, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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A Pattern of Reversals
Luke 6:17-26

Can you believe it's March today? I don't know what it is about turning the calendar to March but it just feels different. March feels like spring although the weather doesn't feel much like it today. But with March comes a sense of new hope - new flowers bursting forth, leaves returning to the trees, new life. Have you noticed our gorgeous daffodils blooming on Canton Road? Symbols of hope in the midst of so much despair.

We don't know what season of the year it was when Jesus began his ministry but we do know that his words brought new hope to those who heard his teachings. Our passage today contains the words that begin what scholars call the Sermon on the Plain. We are more familiar with the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew. They are both extended teaching passages - like sermons that Jesus preached early in his ministry. Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is much longer than Luke's. They both begin with what we call the beatitudes - blessings.

Matthew's beatitudes are the more familiar. Luke recounts only four blessings compared to Matthew's nine and includes parallel woes that cause us to pause. Scholars have spent much time comparing and contrasting the two accounts. As I reread the Sermon on the Plain found in Luke 6 to prepare for this Lenten series of sermons I began to wonder if what we find here invites us not to compare the two gospel writers but to look with new eyes at what Jesus actually said. In Luke's gospel the Sermon on the Plain was the first major teaching directed to his disciples as they began their journey with him to the cross. It seems like a good place for us to start as we too begin that journey to the cross this Lent.

I recently read a story about a conversation between a man and his rabbi. Hasid was called in

to his rabbi. He said, "You rang? You want me?"

"Yes, we need to talk." The rabbi said.

Hasid was rich and didn't share his wealth, and everybody in the temple knew it. So the rabbi brought him into his home and took him to a window and said, "Tell me what you see."

Hasid said, "I see a piece of glass and through it I can see all of the people walking up and down the road."

"Very good. Now come over here. What do you see here?"

"This is a mirror and in it I can only see myself."

And then the rabbi looked at him and said, "Do you know what the difference is between these two pieces of glass? One of them has been coated with silver."

Think about that. When we have coated ourselves with silver, when we have what silver can purchase and it becomes our priority we can only see ourselves. In the end the rabbi told Hasid that he needed to get a new lens to see the world. (<https://sermons.com/sermon/flatliners/281>)

I think that is what Jesus was providing for the disciples - a new lens to see the world. Normally when we read these blessings and woes we center on the first line of each phrase.

"Blessed are you who are poor...hungry...sad..persecuted and expendable"

"Woe to you who are rich, full, happy and popular."

We read them as if we are looking in a mirror and think they are about us - a sort of indictment if we are well off and happy and a word of hope if we are poor and struggling.

But I think there is a broader view of what these words are about - a view that is more like looking out a window and viewing the world as a whole. A view that looks more closely at the second half of the phrases than the first and takes in the whole context of this teaching.

Reading back through the first five chapters of Luke we discover that Jesus went about

teaching but what he taught has not been shared. Right before our passage today Jesus went to the mountain to pray. After his conversation with God he chose the original twelve apostles. We can envision that his time of prayer was asking God's guidance as he chose those he believed should be in his inner circle. And asking for the right words as he began to explain to them what following him would mean. It was now time to teach them what it meant to be a disciple.

After choosing the twelve Jesus came down from the mountain. He stopped on a level place where there was a great crowd as well as his disciples. He took the time to heal those in need of healing. And then scripture says "*he looked up at his disciples*" and began to teach. These words were heard by all those who were present but Jesus' focus was on the disciples he had just chosen. He wanted them to understand what being his disciple meant. That is important my friends because these are the words for the church - for those of us who have made a commitment to follow Jesus. And what he told them was that this life would be a life shaped by a pattern of reversals. It was going to be different than everything they had known before.

He started by saying "*Blessed are you that are poor.*" Now think about the disciples he had just chosen. We have been told that Simon Peter, James and John the fishermen and Levi gave up everything - their way of earning money to follow Jesus. We imagine the others did the same. They were about to experience what we would call the poor. Jesus told them "*yours is the kingdom of God.*" They were hungry - maybe not literally but hungry - eager - to learn God's ways and maybe a little afraid of being physically hungry in the future. Jesus promised them "*you will be filled.*" They might still be grieving over what they had left behind - family, friends, a profession - but the future held laughter. Jesus warned them that people would hate them, exclude them, revile them and defame them - "*on account of the Son of Man.*" They had already begun to see how the Pharisees were questioning Jesus' actions. Jesus was telling them life as his disciples would include more of that.

But then he said *“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy; for surely your reward is great in heaven.”*

And then Jesus said *“for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”* Friends, he just told the disciples that their life would be like the lives of the prophets - those who spoke God’s words to the people but were not appreciated in their own time. But their words and actions would be remembered for centuries to come because they were God’s words and revealed God’s kingdom.

And then in good Jewish parallelism he drove his point home by presenting the other side. In the kingdom of God the rich would realize what they had was not enough. They had been full but would realize they hungered for something more. They had been laughing but would end up mourning and weeping when they realized material things did not bring contentment. They had known power and accolades but would come to realize that they had it all wrong. And once again Jesus drew a parallel to what had happened to the false prophets. If you have read much of the Old Testament prophetic words you know that often there were prophets who said just what the king wanted to hear. Those are the false prophets. They were often killed by the very kings they served when what they had prophesied had not come to fruition.

Friends, these blessings and woes described for the apostles the fact that the world had just been turned upside down for them by their commitment to Jesus. What they were about to learn was a pattern of reversals to all they knew. These words are not prescriptive. Jesus was not telling the disciples how to behave. Barbara Brown Taylor has pointed out that this sermon “is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone.” What Jesus wanted the disciples to understand - wants us to understand - as we walk this journey toward the cross with him is that being a disciple, being an integral part of the kingdom of God here on earth, requires us to not hear Jesus words as if we are looking into a mirror - everything being about us but to open our eyes to see the world through a pain of glass that reveals the

world God desires - God's kingdom. The beatitudes do not tell us what to do. They tell us who we are and more importantly, they reveal who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

We begin this season of Lent with our monthly communion. It occurred to me that here at Christ's table we experience a pattern of reversals as well. The very bread that provides sustenance that keeps us alive is the bread of life - Christ's body - that was broken for us. The cup of salvation - the nectar of the vines - the blood which flows through our veins giving us life - is the same blood that was shed for us - the blood that was drained from Christ's body so that we might have life. Each time we come to this table we experience this pattern of reversals. Here at this table we are called to remember that through the kingdom of God we will be filled, our tears will turn to laughter, others might scorn us for our actions but through God's window our faithfulness will be remembered and rewarded. And so as we come to Christ's table on this first Sunday of Lent may we come inviting God to open our eyes enabling us to see through the pane of glass as God sees the world so that we might be part of bringing the kingdom of God to its fullness here on earth.