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God's Voice Heals Us

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Luke 6:17-26

Introduction

This morning, our Scripture text is from Luke 6:17-26. It begins like this, “Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and great multitude of people...”

This is the Sermon on the Plain. It is similar to Matthew's more famous Sermon on the Mount. As you may guess from the titles, one of the differences is the ground on which it takes place.

As modern readers, two different versions of the same story can make us uncomfortable. We may be tempted to smooth over the differences. We may get stuck on who wrote the facts of what happened. But each of the four Gospels conveys the truth of who Jesus was and still is for us. Each Gospel writer offers a particular perspective in answering the two big questions:

Who is Jesus? And why does that matter?

Luke's perspective is clear early in his Gospel. In Luke 2, the Gospel is first announced. Angels tell the shepherds that they bring good news (the Gospel) of great joy for *all people*— Jesus, the Savior, Messiah, and Lord has been born.

A Gospel for all people. Jesus is Savior, Messiah, and Lord, and it matters because he has come for everyone!

We can miss the fullness of God's Good News to us if we try to smooth out the narratives.

So, this morning, we are going to let Luke be Luke! And as Justo Gonzalez said, “Luke is a hard-hitting Gospel.”

Before we go back to the Gospel reading, will you please pray with me?

Living God,
Attune our ears to hear your Word of truth and grace.
Help soften our hearts when your words challenge us.
Help strengthen our backs when your words encourage us.
Open our imaginations to the vision of your Kingdom
in our lives, in our communities, and in our world.
Speak, Lord, we are listening. Amen.

Scripture: Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. 18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 “Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22 “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son

of Man. 23 Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

24 "But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

25 "Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26 "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

It Begins with Healing

Jesus is not afraid to preach a hard word. By the time we get to the end of this reading, we can feel so shaken that we may forget where we began—with healing.

Jesus came down from a mountain where he had spent time in prayer. He chose his twelve disciples. And led them down to this level place where people were gathering from all over. From the south in Jerusalem, way up north at the border, in Gentile territory, of Sidon. From the country, towns, and cities. The poor, the wealthy, the religious, the sinners, the respected, and the outcasts. These people traveled, some for days, to see and hear Jesus. What had gotten him kicked out of his hometown synagogue, drew this diverse group to him.

Everyone is on the same plain—from his closest followers to the skeptical onlookers. And Jesus heals them all.

The story could have ended there. This great, disparate crowd gathered on a level plain, healed by the presence and power of Christ. That is an incredible image of God's Kingdom drawn near, of salvation, of Jesus changing the lives of individuals who seek him in their pain, in their questions, in their hopes for a fuller life.

But the Kingdom of God, salvation through Christ, the healing Jesus brings is not merely you (singular) eye to eye with Christ. It is not only about Jesus taking your sin, your pain, your burdens, your uncertainty, and bringing about restoration for you.

Jesus' mission is bigger. Christ has come to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, sight to the blind, the forgiveness of debts, and an end to the cycle of retribution. Jesus heals each person on that level place as a foretaste of the reign of God that he inaugurated. Each individual healing is just a hint at the transformative, world-upending healing he invites us into through his teaching.

We Need More than a Band-Aid

I was an accident-prone kid.

When I was in elementary school, I used to take my bike a few blocks up my street near a friend's house. There, in a dead-end alley, some older kids had built a bike jump out of dirt. I thought I was really cool—my other friends were too afraid to get air, but I would pedal as fast as I could and those few inches between my tire and the ground made me feel like I was in the X Games.

One day, I went to the jump alone. And I wholeheartedly went for it—as I had done numerous times without any problem in the past. But there was a problem. Someone had dug a ditch on the other side of the jump. They had made it more of a challenge: You had to get enough air and make it over the ditch to safely land.

Friends, I was not that good at jumping my bike. My front tire landed straight in the ditch, and I flew off, landing on my knee, on the rocky dirt.

It hurt. I sat there for a while contemplating how I could fix it without showing my mom, but eventually I hobbled onto my feet and limped over to my friend's house.

She was one of four kids, and I was sure her parents would have a band-aid I could throw over the wound on my knee. I was shocked to find out that they didn't have any bandages. Instead, I had to call my mom, and she walked me gently home. She thoroughly cleaned and bandaged my cut, which was more painful than the fall itself.

My reaction—and I think most kids and teens can relate—was to cover the wound as quickly as possible: To throw a band-aid over it; pretend it never happened.

But wounds don't heal by hiding them.

The Good News of Blessings...and Woes

Jesus begins teaching and exposes the wounds that are yet to be healed.

Through his words, his healing power becomes communal, societal, world changing.

Blessed are you who are poor...who hunger...who weep...who are excluded.

But woe to you who are rich...who are full now...who are laughing now...who don't ruffle anyone's feathers.

Jesus speaks directly to the woundedness of the people in front of him, the woundedness of his time and place. But these are wounds with which we still hobble around 2000 years later.

Jesus sees those who are struggling just to get by, who carry heavy burdens, who can't seem to get ahead. He sees those who suffer under oppression, those who dare to speak against the powers that be, and those who find themselves under threat of retribution.

They are blessed. In God's eyes, they are heirs of God's Kingdom; they will one day feast and celebrate. The Kingdom of God is at hand, and these are the honored ones.

It gets more jarring. Jesus offers more than words of upside-down blessing. We must let Luke be Luke and reveal a fuller picture of God's Kingdom and Christ's word— and that includes the woes.

Luke began telling us this through Mary:

God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and
lifted up the lowly;

God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Jesus gets it from his mom.

He also gets it from the prophets before him:
Isaiah tells us,

“Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together.”

The humble, the lowly, the disrespected in this world will be lifted up. The powerful, the wealthy, the respected in this world will be brought down.

They came to a level place and were healed.

Christ brings radical change. Jesus did not come into this world to be a chaplain to the status quo. Jesus is not a priest of “how we do things here.” He is the prophet, the savior, the Lord of God’s Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. He came to turn the world upside down—or really to turn our upside-down world right-side up.

When we need the world to change, we hear this as good news. When we need our lives to change, we hear this as good news.

But when we’re comfortable with things as they are, with our lives and our world as it is; when we fear what we might have

to give up in order for the hungry and poor and outcast to be level with us, woe to us. The Gospel might start to sound a little too radical.

Jesus looks around the crowd, and he sees those who are rich, who are well-fed, who are content, who have found favor with the powerful and wealthy. He warns them. Do not settle for being near the top of pyramid scheme. It will crumble and the fall will be hard.

It might feel like he's ripping off the band-aid if you aren't ready for it. But these woes are words of healing, too.

Living on top at the expense of others wounds us. It wounds the image of God in us to ignore the pain of our neighbors. It wounds the image of God in us to see suffering and to just be thankful it isn't us.

We are wounded when billionaires are celebrated, and children are unable to afford their lunch at school. We are wounded when the powerful speak of efficiency, and life-saving treatments are left to sit unused in warehouses.

We are collectively wounded whenever might makes right in this world.

Mo and the Level Ground Around Us

I recently finished watching the show *Mo* on Netflix. I highly recommend it. The show follows a Palestinian refugee named Mohammed, who goes by Mo. His family first fled to Kuwait then to the US, settling in Houston. For 22 years his family's asylum case has been pending, so he lives as a man without a land.

The show is heartfelt, gut-wrenching, and funny.

There is a poignant scene at one point between Mo and his mom. He feels like he is spinning in circles, each time he thinks he's getting ahead, he ends up back at step 1. And his mom asks him, "Mo, do you think Allah (they are Muslim) cares what your job is or if you have citizenship or a passport?" And Mo kind of laughs at the thought of God holding those things against him. She goes on, "The world will always try to put us down, and when they do, we smile— because we know who we are."

Sometimes you hear the Gospel from unexpected places. God lifts up the lowly, those who have been pushed down our systems and norms operate in this world. God reminds them who they are. God heals the wounds this world inflicts on the dignity of God's children. God reminds you, when you are cast aside and beat down, of who you are.

We hear the rich and powerful loudly and clearly. We hear what they want and what they think and how they will save the world. Christ doesn't call us to climb up to throne of the powerful and be healed by their word. That is not the story of God.

Christ calls us to level ground. If we want to hear God's voice and be healed, we need to meet him on the plain, where we see each other eye to eye. The place where we see the full humanity of the Palestinian refugee, of the trans teenager, of the incarcerated mother, of the homeless man we pass every day on the bridge, of the foster child, of the father struggling with opioid addiction.

My healing is caught up in yours and yours in mine, and ours in the people who we exploit and the people we put on pedestals and the people we resent or distrust. Our healing is bound up together.

Dr. King gave us this image, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Jesus meets us on the level ground of our God-given dignity.
May we hear God’s voice and be healed.
Amen.



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