

To Which Group Do You Belong?

Luke 6:17-26

Many of us are more familiar with Matthew's Sermon on the Mount than Luke's Sermon on the Plain. Luke's less familiar version is known as the Sermon on the Plain, because Jesus "went down with them and stood on a level place." (Luke 6:17a)

While Luke 6:12-16 are not included in today's Gospel lesson, they are important as background. Jesus spent the night on a mountain in prayer and chose the twelve apostles from a larger group of disciples that was present with him. The mountain is more significant theologically than geographically. Mountains were places to pray and to encounter God. A mountain is the perfect place for the call of those who will constitute the core leadership of the church.

Jesus then gives his Sermon on the Plain, in which he further turns their legalistic world on its head. In this sermon, Jesus gives them a glimpse into the kingdom of God – an upside-down world by their standards. For Jesus to be on the mountain to pray, and then return to "a level place" was a way to anchor his actions in communion with God, yet to identify him with crowds on the level of ordinary, everyday human existence.

Today as we explore God's word and its meaning in our life, I would like us to consider, "To which group do I belong?" I think that the question is as applicable today as it was over 2,000 years ago when Jesus first preached these words.

THE THREE GROUPS

"A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon." (Luke 6:17b) The places mentioned in verse 17 are an interesting mix. Judea is the southern province. Jerusalem, located in Judea, is the home of the temple and the most orthodox of Jewish leaders. It represents the religious status quo – Jesus' opposition. Tyre and Sidon are Gentile cities on the coast just north of Capernaum. Their mention suggests the presence of Gentiles among the crowd at the Sermon on the Plain. Together, these four places emphasize the breadth of Jesus' ministry, from far north to far south, from orthodox Jews to Gentiles.

There are three identifiable groups of people in the crowds. First, there is the just-chosen group of twelve apostles who would carry on the ministry of Jesus. Much of what unfolds in the Gospels will revolve around these twelve. Next, there are the larger crowds of disciples who are followers of Jesus, who have responded to His ministry, but who have not received a special call from Jesus. And then there are the others, both Jews and Gentiles, who are there for various reasons but who have not yet become disciples. It is this mixed group that provides the setting for the sermon.

"They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured." (Luke 6:18). They came to Jesus because they had heard that He could help them – and help them He did. There is a lesson here for the church. Our primary mission, as outlined in the Great Commission, is to go, to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach. However, if we are

to be faithful to the Lord's example, we must also address mundane needs as well – food, clothing, shelter, health, safety, disaster relief, and education. The needs, which the church has met over the centuries and is meeting today, are nearly endless.

Luke casts the Jews in a bad light, so we must ask whether we can realistically expect them to understand the upside-down kingdom that Jesus portrays. Aren't they following Torah law as faithfully as they can? Isn't it too much to expect that they should understand Jesus? Shouldn't Luke portray them more sympathetically?

The scribes and Pharisees are trying to be faithful to the law, and for that we should admire them. However, they ignored the prophets, whom their forefathers killed. In His Nazareth synagogue sermon, Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, who expressed God's concern for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, captives, and prisoners – verses that set the tone for this Gospel and the book of Acts. Concern for the weak and widowed abounds in the psalms and the prophets.

Even in the Torah, God provided for the poor to eat grapes and grain from a neighbor's field, required farmers to leave food for gleaners, forbade charging interest, required slave-owners to set slaves free in the Sabbath Year, and required land-owners to return ancestral lands to their original owners in the Year of Jubilee. God reminded Israel that they were slaves in Egypt, so they should treat slaves with compassion. Maybe Luke had it right.

To which group do you belong?

THE BLESSED

Luke's version of the beatitudes differs from Matthew 5:1-12 in the number of beatitudes, the presence of woes in Luke, Matthew speaks in the third person whereas Luke speaks in the second person, and Matthew spiritualizes the beatitudes while Luke simply states them as is.

Some modern translations use the word “happy” instead of “blessed”. That is an unfortunate choice, given the connotations associated with the word happy in our culture. In the Greek world, it denoted a person's inner happiness. The blessing here is the security of knowing that one is right with God.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke 6:20). Who are the poor? While they include the financially impoverished, Jesus likely intends them also to include other disadvantaged people, powerless people, and marginalized people. Robert H. Stein in *The New American Commentary* says, “The term ‘poor’ has more of a theological than an economic sense here.” He points out that David, in three different psalms claims to be “poor and needy.” “Clearly no reader of these psalms thought that King David was referring to his economic status, for, as a king, David was not economically poor. They would have interpreted this metaphorically as in ‘poor in spirit’.”

“Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” (Luke 6:21) The hungry are not only those with physical hunger, but also those that are seeking to be filled with righteousness. Those that are weeping are sensitive to evil, to

the world's rebellion against God, and the world's suffering in consequence. While the blessing of the poor is in the present, the blessing of the hungry and those who weep is in the future.

The last beatitude is, "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man." (Luke 6:22) This beatitude is different in that it promises a reward to those who endure rejection or persecution because of their faithfulness to Christ.

To which group do you belong?

THE WOES

Jesus has pronounced four blessings (poor, hungry, weeping, hated). Now he pronounces four corresponding woes (rich, full, laughing, well-spoken). "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." (Luke 6:24) The rich include those who are financially prosperous, but that term also connotes belonging and power, and a sense of arrogance that does not require God.

We wonder why Jesus should bless the poor and pronounce woes on the rich. We can offer only possible answers. Perhaps the rich are tempted to trust in their wealth, while the poor are more likely to trust in God. Perhaps the rich used improper methods to attain their wealth. Perhaps they are inclined to take advantage of more vulnerable people. However, we know well-to-do people who lead lives of faith and less-well-to-do people who do not. We also know well-to-do people who are generous and less-well-to-do people who are not.

"Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep." (Luke 6:25) This woe emphasizes the passing nature of privileged living. Those who have become accustomed to having plenty of food find it especially difficult to tolerate half rations. When we are laughing at others, we are not crying out to God for the wisdom of the Spirit to care for them and love them.

"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets." (Luke 6:26) Humans are prone to speak well of those who agree with them or those who might give favors in return for flattery. God, however, judges by a different standard. He will reward those who speak the truth rather than the false prophets who speak what people want to hear.

To which group do you belong?

NOW WHAT?

Who's got it bad? Who's got it good? Who's got joy waiting for them? Who can expect sorrow in the future? Our society has its answers of these questions, and they are pretty much the same answers the contemporaries of Jesus would give.

Korean United Methodist Church at San Antonio
Sermon by Tom White

We think the ones who have it bad are the poor, the hungry, the sad, and the scorned. We think the ones who have it good are the rich, the well-fed, the satisfied, and the respectable. Jesus says something different. The blessed are those who sure don't look that way. Joy is stored up for them.

Actually the them here is us, or so it would seem. Jesus says as much. He looks at the faces of the people around Him – it is a diverse audience: disciples and strangers, Jews and Gentiles – He looks them in the face and says: Blessed are you if you are this way, but woe to you if you are that way. He's talking about the people in front of him, and He's talking about us here this morning.

So I ask you, “To which group do you belong?” Do you belong to the disciples, a follower of Jesus and have responded to His ministry? Or do you belong to the Jews and Gentiles, here for various reasons but you have not yet become a disciple? Do you belong to the blessed – the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the hated? Or do you belong to the woes – the rich, the full, the laughing, and the well-spoken?

I pray that as we continue to grow individually and corporately, we take time to evaluate where we are on our faith journey. And that we help and encourage each other in that growth. So that when asked, ‘To which group do you belong’, we readily know the answer. So that when others look at us, it is readily apparent to them to Whom we belong.