

“The Important Stuff” – Luke 6:17-26

I know it sounds trite to say it, but we live in a world that worships strength, power, wealth, control and self-control. Economic success, political success and business acumen are paraded alongside – and even proclaimed as – the keys to social acceptance. “You too can be accepted as a somebody if only you’re wealthy enough”, blare the messengers of worldly acceptance. “Blessed are the rich and powerful” is the mantra chimed out endlessly on nine hundred channels of satellite TV. “Blessed are the beautiful” is the headline plastered across the magazine racks, with the clear implication “cursed are you who do not spend all to join their ranks”.

And we have bought right into it, haven’t we? When we pray, “Lord, we ask your blessings upon us,” are we not asking for the classic blessings – peace, prosperity, safety, security, feeling good, looking good? I’m reminded of the scenes in the movie “Trading Places”, in which the smarmy wealthy young scion is greeted by his friends, “looking good, Lewis” and retorts automatically, “feeling good!” How many times have we, sitting down to a huge meal, cashing a significant paycheque, or perhaps even from the rail of a cruise ship either thought or said, “I/we are truly blessed!”?

However, here in our gospel text is a totally different message from Jesus. Here in Luke’s abbreviated version of the familiar Sermon on the Mount we hear Jesus proclaim God’s attitude as being completely opposite to that of the world – no surprise there as this is a common and often-recurring theme from Jesus! It’s not necessarily easy to understand why Jesus said what he did here, because it call for a bit of thinking. An example of this kind of expression comes from my childhood. My mother used to say to us kids when we were getting a bit hysterical, “you’ll soon be laughing on the other side of your face.” It took a long time for me to understand but I eventually realized she was paraphrasing this message from Jesus, where he declares, “woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.”

Even the setting in Luke provides some puzzling questions. While we get the unofficial title “Sermon on the Mount” from the much more familiar version in Matthew’s gospel, Luke depicts this message being delivered by Jesus after he came down off the mountain 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”. According to Luke, this was no lofty message delivered in stratospheric heights to a select crowd of social climbers. It seems that his message was not even spoken to the crowds, as in fact the text tells us that “Jesus looked up at his disciples and said, blessed are you...” Where Matthew has the message aimed at the crowd, Luke considers it a message to the faithful, to those who have committed themselves to serving Jesus.

We could be excused if we at this point considered the people in the crowd who had been healed as having been blessed. I’m sure they considered themselves so, because a major emphasis, perhaps the major emphasis of their Jewish faith centered on the understandings in their scriptures of a theology of blessings and curses. In particular, the understanding was clear that those who were faithful and maintained a right relationship with God would be heartily blessed with health, wealth, happiness and grandchildren. Those who fell out of favour from God would find instead curses of ill health, ravaging enemies, crop failures and climate change. And so by definition under the old covenant, those who had been healed had indeed been, and would be considered, blessed.

But Jesus, in this subtle yet powerful statement, points out to his disciples that the whole definition of what it meant to be blessed was a-changing. Was it a caution to them not to get too puffed up over what had just happened in the healing of the crowd? Was Jesus warning them not to succumb to the temptations of fame and wealth that could surely come their way if they decided to build cathedrals and empires? Or was he simply defining for them what he considered to be the important stuff, at least important both to him and to God? We can't be totally sure, but it still seems like good advice today.

Now, a HUGE word of caution is required here. There is a tremendous danger of misusing this word from Jesus, and indeed it has been so misused often in the past. This is NOT an exhortation to find a way to keep poor people poor so that they will be extra-blessed! It is NOT a justification to ignore the plight of people who go to bed hungry, thinking it's ok since because they are last in the food line they'll be first in the heaven line. This passage should never be used as an excuse to overlook hatred, rejection, reviling and defaming. Neither can it be legitimately used to exercise hatred and revulsion towards those who are wealthy, simply because they are rich.

What then is it about, and how do we incorporate this message? This passage is truly prophetic in the sense of proclaiming to us what God sees as most important. The tone it sets is one of controversy, which should be no surprise given the rest of Jesus' ministry. With his confrontations against the scribes and Pharisees who would abuse the people, his whip-flailing, table-overturning attacks on those who would abuse the church, his challenges to all who would listen with his familiar "you say ..., but I say ...", Jesus proclaimed constantly that the foundational values, indeed the whole reward system of the kingdom of God are different from those of human society. Grace instead of grabbing. Compassion over competition. Mercy, comfort, righteousness are the rewards to those who seek the kingdom of God.

"It's not easy", you might be thinking, and I agree with you. It's not easy. In fact, it's even tougher than it first appears. At first glance it would seem that we could use this text as a list of ways to behave. I believe that it was Robert Schuler from the Crystal Cathedral who did kind of a 'cute' thing with this text, calling it the be-attitudes, a play on the unofficial title of the section. The idea was that we are here given a list of attitudes to adopt. I have some problems with that approach – take for example adopting a permanent attitude of mourning to be continuously blessed. Now I've met some people, and I'm sure you have too, who are almost professional mourners in the faith, and who try to spread their gloom and pain to all around them, and I think it's pretty clear here that Jesus does not call us to adopt their attitude. Quite the contrary, he specifically exhorts us to "rejoice and be glad".

Well, if this text is not a list of ways to behave, what then is it? I believe this declaration from Jesus is meant to remind his disciples, to remind the whole church, what is the important stuff. Not that the church has always listened. It's easy to think of those times in history when the church was bloated with wealth and power. We can readily picture images from the middle ages of portly archbishops and cardinals waddling along with kings and courtiers through marbled cathedrals built upon the backs of poor parishioners. Today those images are replaced with television images of "big hair", big smiles, throngs of thousands who speak well of and support private jets and large mansions for the church leaders who certainly are full now.

It seems particularly appropriate to be looking at this text today, since we will also soon be looking at our congregation in the Annual Meeting. Jesus here reminds his disciples, his followers, his church that living in the Kingdom is not about being rich, or big, or well-regarded. If we are concentrating on the important stuff, then it's not only OK but even blessed to be struggling, to be poor, to be reviled for His sake. If we're winning popularity contests even in Presbytery, then we're not sufficiently pushing the boundaries of proclaiming God's redeeming grace in Christ. If we're fat with cash, then we're not focusing on how we can help others but on how we can help ourselves. If we're never weeping, it's because we're never hearing and feeling the pain of those who cannot yet hear how God loves them in Christ.

Hear one more time the essence of this text, "Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who focus on the important stuff, for yours is the kingdom of God'."