

"Jesus and the Teachable Moment"

(JEREMIAH 17:5-10 NRSV)

Thus says the LORD:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals

*and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the LORD.*

*⁶They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,*

in an uninhabited salt land.

*⁷Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.*

*⁸They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.*

*It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.*

*⁹The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?*

*¹⁰I the LORD test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.*

(LUKE 6:17-26 NRSV) *He 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.*

¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then 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.*

²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to 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 what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

Both these texts have beatitudes: "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord." "Blessed are the poor... you who hunger now... you who weep now... you when men hate you..."

But these beatitudes in Luke aren't the familiar ones we remember from the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew. In the first place, they're briefer; only four of them. Matthew has nine. In the second place, Matthew doesn't include the list of woes in his beatitudes. Oh, Matthew has a list of woes, but they appear later in his Gospel, and are directed specifically at the Scribes and Pharisees. In Luke, the "woes" are tacked on right after the "blesseds", and both are addressed to the same

group.

Now that gives us a little trouble, I think, because of where we position ourselves in relation to the text. In Matthew it's easy for us to sit on the grassy hillside and feel the breeze in our face as Jesus speaks to us and blesses us. Then, later, we can stand behind Jesus and look over his shoulder when he confronts the Scribes and Pharisees and says, "Woe to you Scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites!" We can stand behind him and say, "Yeah! Go get 'em Jesus!"

In Luke, though, we're out front receiving the "blesseds", so, we also have to deal with the "woes."

Another reason we prefer Matthew's beatitudes may be that he spiritualizes" them: "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *after righteousness*..." Luke just says, "Blessed are the poor... Blessed are those who hunger, now..." A casual stroll through our parking lot will suggest that we're not poor! Yeah, my old truck's 17 years old and has 260k miles on it. It rattles and creaks driving on these wonderful Conway streets; but I'm not walking.

And my bathroom scaled rudely reminds me every morning that hunger is not a major problem with me. Blessed are the poor in spirit: yeah, that's me. Blessed are the poor: not so much.

Of course, we're not rich. I've never met anyone who considered himself rich. And yet, it's true: Americans who live on welfare have more annual income than eighty percent of the world's population; and I do better than that! But that's not rich. Rich is like Warren Buffet and Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates.

Denial. It works for some.

The owner of a small, independent oil company in Tulsa (employed about 600 people) addressed a gathering of ministers in the mid 90s and spoke on what the laity in the pew want to hear from the pulpit. He said, "Don't tell us about all the poor people in the world. We hear about that every night in the news; and we give to the poor. We have hurts, too. We have kids on drugs, too. I'm not a wealthy man; I'm a working man, just like you. I have to worry about meeting a payroll for 600 people every week. When I come to church I want to be comforted.

I had no doubt he had hurts; and I had no doubt he deserved comforting as much as anybody. But I had problems with his tactic of avoiding the issue: "I'm a working man, just like you!" And then he got in his Porche 914 and went back to his penthouse office. Just like me?

Of course, there's nothing wrong with owning a Porche and working in a penthouse office; but apparently, he thought we preachers thought something was wrong with that; so he avoided the real issue.

Denial. It works for some.

And anger works for some. I remember, several years ago, preaching from this text, or one of the other ones in which Jesus denounces the rich and extols the poor; and after the service I was confronted by one of the elders who said, "I really get sick and tired of preachers trying to make me feel guilty because I've had some financial success!" He had a valid point!

And, of course, there's always rationalization. That's probably the way most

people choose to deal with the issue: "It's not how much money you have; it's what you do with it." That's valid. But are you sure—I'm not sure—it's the standard by which I want my life—my financial stewardship—judged! Consider how much of your money you give for the benefit of others—through the church or elsewhere; and then compare it to the money you spend on what your drive, what you wear, the house you live in, the way you vacation, your recreation... Season tickets...

Where do you draw the line? I don't know. What is rich? How much is enough wealth? What is poor? And where do we draw the line on how much we should give to the church and to the poor, and how much we keep for ourselves and our families? We want to be included when Jesus hands out the "blesseds"; but we don't want to be poor—or hungry—or in mourning—or hated. The beatitudes—at least as Luke reports them—present almost a "no-win" scenario.

So, I wasn't going to preach from this text today. What is there to say that I haven't already said from this pulpit—that Donna didn't preach? Or Will? Or Judy? We've covered the denial, the anger, the avoidance, the rationalization...

Then, I noted something I'd missed every time before, when I'd studied this text: I noted those three verses before Jesus ever begins his beatitudes. Listen: vs. 17: "He went down with them and stood on a level place".

That's the language of incarnation: Christ, coming down to stand with the people at their level. John puts it this way: "The word became flesh and lived with us." (John 1:14)

And note their response, in the second half of the verse: "They were coming from all over..." They left their comfort zones to go and seek him out.

vs 18: "They came to hear him and be healed.... Those troubled by evil spirits were cured."

vs. 19: "...the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all."

What are the three most important issues in beginning a study of scripture? Remember? Context. Context. Context.

So, after they had left their comfort zones to go out and find Jesus—after they had surrendered their brokenness to him to be healed—after they had reached out to him for the power that could put them back together again—after they had put themselves in a position to hear, then—then—Jesus began to teach them.

Teachers call it "the 'teachable moment'." Family therapists call it "the "no-problem area of relationships." That productive time in life and relationships, when really effective teaching and learning and healing and loving and playing can happen. That condition in which we are receptive and ready to listen; ready to learn; ready to be healed.

Context.

Brokenness is a reality we all experience; it is the context in which our culture exists: stresses at work and school; dysfunctional families and broken relationships... a social system in which wealth is seen as a sign of divine blessing and poverty is seen as a sign of self-induced woe. Brokenness. Some people wallow in it and wave their brokenness like a victory banner, while others close it all up inside. Some deny it...

Some grow angry with it... Some rationalize it...

The call in Luke is to acknowledge a healthy, effective way to deal with brokenness by surrendering it to Jesus.

OK. I'm a preacher. That's what I'm supposed to say. Right?

Context. In Luke's story the context was an oppressed people living under the heavy thumb of Rome. There was a core of people with relative affluence—merchants and farmers and skilled crafts people and bankers and money lenders. And the religious leaders and those who were most faithful in their participation in the Temple rituals were from that core of relative influence.

And then there were the poor—particularly widows and orphans and the elderly—people with diseases and afflictions—victims of accidents and natural disasters who were thought to be in that condition because they were lazy and because they were sinners. It was thought that they were possessed by demons. They therefore were outcast and discounted. Blaming the victim is not a new thing.

Jesus attracted both segments of his society: the more affluent because they thought he was leading a movement to remove from them the burden of Roman taxation and to increase their wealth and influence; and the poor because he fed them and healed them and comforted them.

You see, the heart of Jesus' work and ministry was directed toward improving the lot of that poor class of people; and a major context in Luke's Gospel is the confrontation between Jesus and those who were disappointed—in fact, some were enraged (read the 4th chapter)—that he hadn't come to make their lot better.

Notice in today's text, that the woes are not directed at criminal or openly hurtful behavior. The woes are directed at those whose satisfaction blinds them to the brokenness around them.

I think Luke's point, by addressing both blessedness and woe in the same discourse, is that brokenness is not just a socio-economic condition; not just a condition of physical health and well-being. A society is broken when systems are in place—and I believe it would be irrelevant to Jesus, whether those systems were related to government, or the private sector, or faith communities, or philanthropies—when systems are in place that favor one segment of that society and create (or at least don't eliminate) conditions in which poverty and brokenness can flourish.

Again, I'm not calling for government intervention (although, I'm not necessarily opposed to that). In fact, my personal preference would be that some agency other than government make the difference. But Jesus calls us to follow him in making that difference.

Luke places Jesus and his work and ministry in a particular context in which his message not only is to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and comfort those who mourn—a call this congregation answers faithfully and consistently, but his message also calls us to follow him in his movement to confront the systems that create or ignore the conditions of poverty. He calls us to get involved in changing the system.

And that's how we surrender our brokenness to him.