

Disciples and Apostles  
Luke 6.17-26  
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What's wrong with this picture? Luke has gone way over the top with this "sermon on the plain." Unlike Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, Luke is not spiritualizing the message. Luke is not telling us that in the "sweet by and by" all of the hungry will be fed; the homeless will have a mansion in heaven and all God's "chillin'" will have shoes.

What most preachers do with this Gospel story is that they so water it down that the comfortable stay comfortable. I do not believe that is being true to this text. Now, I do believe that most of us are more interested in ourselves than we are interested in God. So, we are not unusual for being self-centered. In fact, we are part of the majority when what we really want is to stay comfortable and to not be troubled with what God wants. And that is what is wrong with this picture. Jesus has turned upside down the culture of his audience. He describes a different world. It is not what they expect to hear.

Think about this story. Luke tells us that the people came to hear Jesus preach or teach, and they also came to be healed. They wanted to plug into the therapeutic power that came from Jesus. In our culture, there may be some people in church on Sunday morning asking, "What is God really like?" But my experience with our consumer-oriented culture is that most people, even in church, are asking, "Jesus, what have you done for me lately?" In some ways, the crowd that gathered to hear Jesus is not so different from us.

In my opinion, a sermon is about God. Because it is only after we experience who God is and what God is about in the world, that we can we figure out how our behavior fits with God's purpose. We do not hear much about eschatology from pulpits today. And why should we? We have it so good, why would we long for a time when things will be better? We are already sitting on top of the world. We are already very comfortable.

Luke paints a picture of the kingdom of God. Jesus tells the crowd that these blessings and woes are the way it will be in the kingdom. The crowd, more or less, expects to hear that. The surprise comes when Jesus tells them that the blessings and woes are already happening.

Before he starts to preach, Jesus heals everyone and exorcises all of their demons. His preaching continues to heal us of our contorted notions of God. Jesus releases us from our captivity in order to embrace the new reality of this kingdom.

Jesus blesses those whom the world curses – the poor, the unemployed, the dispossessed and the oppressed. If Jesus would had only stopped there. If he had given us these sweet blessings and stopped, then we would not be troubled with the curses. But he does not stop. Jesus wags his finger at us and says, "Damn you. Damn you. You have already stuffed yourselves so full of everything this culture has to offer that you have no more room. What can God do for you?"

But, I get ahead of the story, or the sermon. This sermon, not mine, the one in Luke, is made of assertions, of statements. They are what a sixth grade English teacher would identify as the indicative mood. Jesus is stating facts.

Blessed are the poor – you know who they are – the ones we overlook, disregard, despise and think of as failures.

Blessed are the hungry – the ones we think are hungry because they are too lazy to work or too inept to keep a job.

Blessed are those who weep – because they are the whiners and complainers who think they always have it worse than everyone else.

Blessed are you when people hate you – because you are abrasive, or holier-than-thou, or self-righteous, or a religious fanatic.

God blesses those we tend to curse.

Is this really our God? Is this a God we want? This God does not sound like the God all of us good, church-going, Bible believing folks know. This God does not fit our Sunday school image. Hearing about this God is like coming up out of a deep cave into the blinding sunlight of midday.

But perhaps that is the real point of preaching. Good preaching does not first tell us what to do. But rather, good preaching first helps us to see. Perhaps that is why Jesus began by healing people. Healing is a sign that a whole new world is breaking into this old world of ours. The light of this new world is shining into the darkness of our old world.

So, at least today, we are not told to go out to do something. Although, you may have already begun to think of some things that you need to do. Disciples, remember that disciples are those of us who are learning how to follow Jesus. We live the way we do not simply because Christ has told us to live a certain way, but rather we live a certain way because we know how the world is supposed to be.

Often when I meet someone for the first time, or if I am engaged in a conversation at a cocktail party by someone who has never before had the occasion to have a conversation with a real live minister, the frequent comment I hear is, “Oh I could never do that. It must be depressing to hear other people’s problems.” Or “I couldn’t handle having so many people thinking they were my boss.” Or “Isn’t it hard doing all of those funerals?”

A long time ago I realized that I better find a way to survive in this crazy business of ministry. So, this is what I do: when I visit in the hospital and see people who are very ill, I think about all of those other patients who get well and go home. When I meet with a family to talk about the funeral for their loved one, I focus on the marvelous gift of life that the person was. When I see a child that is acutely ill, or traumatized by an accident, I thank God for my children. I promised myself that I would spend more time at home with my family. I promised God that I would

never take my family or my life for granted. As a minister, I want to model that behavior for other fathers and husbands.

One of the reasons we keep coming back to this place on Sundays is to be reminded of what's what, to be reminded of the vision, to see again the picture of the world where God is in Jesus Christ. We come to this place to be reminded of who we are and whose we are. All of us can be disciples. Some of us may even be apostles.