

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY  
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A little boy walked down the beach, and as he did, he spied a matronly woman sitting under a beach umbrella on the sand. He walked up to her and asked, "Are you a Christian?" "Yes." "Do you read your Bible every day?" She nodded her head, "Yes." "Do you pray often?" the boy asked next, and again she answered, "Yes." With that he asked his final question. "Will you hold my quarter while I go swimming?"

So “woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort, from the famous speech according to the gospel writer Luke, known as the Sermon on the Plain (vs. the extremely famous sermon we all know from Matthew, called the Sermon on the Mount). The Sermon on the Mount is full of blessings; the Sermon on the Plain is full of woes. The writer and pastor Stephanie Lobdell of the Nazarene Church tells this story of the experience with rich vs poor:

She tells the story of a man who paced “in their church foyer during a pastoral

conference as he talked to his wife on the phone.

“Yeah, I think they can help.” He looked up at me as I stood waiting for him to finish his call. “I’m just waiting for one of the pastors to come out and talk to me.”

I sighed, mostly silently. *I am one of the pastors, dude. Sorry I don’t look the part.* I tucked away my annoyance, smiled, and reached for his hand, “Hi, I’m Pastor Stephanie. What’s going on, friend?”

His face flashed brief surprise at realizing I was the pastor, but he quickly recovered and told me his story. His developmentally delayed stepson was sick, so sick they had taken him to the ER

the night before. A battery of tests had all come back negative and so a simple diagnosis of a strong virus was given. His son needed a prescription, but their social security check was still four long days away.

“How much do you need?” I asked, noting in the back of my mind how behind we were in our church budgets once again this month.

“\$7.06” came the answer.

\$7.06. His son’s wellbeing was in jeopardy over less than ten dollars.

*Blessed are the poor.*

My frustration at the interruption, at the “oh *you’re* the pastor?” slight, the cynicism at yet another request for

assistance vanished, leaving me sheepish and ashamed.

*Blessed are the poor.*

I prayed with him, listened to his story of which there was plenty, and gave him what he needed, knowing that while I had helped him with a small material need, he had helped me with a much deeper spiritual need, the need to remember that,

*Blessed are the poor.*

In this week's Gospel *pericope*, we hear the Lucan version of the Sermon on the Mount, often referred to as the Sermon on the Plain. While its structure and themes parallel those of Matthew's account, there are notable differences, particularly the differences between

Matthew's Beatitudes and Luke's Blessing and Woes. While Matthew emphasizes the poor in spirit, those who hunger after righteousness, Luke is not interested in metaphor, but in the actual poor, those with rumbling bellies and empty wallets, those who can't pay for their son's medications.<sup>i</sup> It's a matter of the poor in theory or spirit vs. the poor in actuality. Both have their place in God's kingdom, and both find their day depending on what's happening in one's life. It is said that it is hard to look up to heaven to pray when one's sights are set on a bowl of rice. So the work we do with local food pantries and soup kitchens is more important than you and I will ever even know.

Though many of us may not realize the grave disparities that exist in our own communities, did you know that people struggle with hunger in every county and congressional district in Delaware? They could be our neighbors, kids in our children's classes – the possibilities go on. Delaware continues to rank among states with the greatest percentage of its residents struggling with so-called "food security."<sup>iii</sup> As important as this is, the bible is not concerned with Delaware in this state or any state. It is concerned that we not only consider items of spiritual hunger, noting that “mortal hunger” is a concern of God also. I find a tidbit of what God intends in the definition from *Wikipedia*, surprisingly.

It proclaims that “in politics, humanitarian aid, and social science, hunger is a condition in which a person, for a sustained period, is unable to eat sufficient food to meet basic nutritional needs. So in the field of hunger relief, the term *hunger* is used in a sense that goes beyond the **common desire for food that all humans experience.**<sup>iii</sup> (my bold) There is a longing that permeates the soul that after a time becomes a part of the soul itself.

I've looked for a word or phrase that might describe this feeling, but I'm not sure I can find one. It's like the dance we do when we go to pass someone on the street or in a room. We go the same way the other does

trying to get out of their way, yet you're both in each other's way. What does one call that movement? I feel that same about the dance we do between the hungers that meet up in our bodies. Would we call it "The Hunger of the Spirit?" "The Hunger of the Soul?" All I know is that hunger, *true* hunger, has a component of a spiritual nature to it. It has to do with prayer, but can't be prayed away. It has to do with religion, but lacks a deity as its center. It has a spirit that is alive, a Word that speaks beyond words; a law that is beyond truth. It is Hunger with a capital H, for it is Divine. Which is what makes it a Beatitude, a la Luke.

One may wonder, what is the purpose of The Beatitudes, whether they be from Matthew or Luke? Here's one definition from The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church. We're told that "The Beatitudes reveal the goal of **human existence**, the ultimate end of human acts: God calls us to his own beatitude. This vocation is addressed to each individual personally, but also to the Church as a whole, the new people made up of those who have accepted the promise and live from it in faith." It goes on to state, regarding happiness, "The Beatitudes respond to the natural desire for happiness. This desire is of divine origin: God has placed it in the human heart in order to draw man to

the One who alone can fulfill it.”<sup>iv</sup>

Therefore, happiness is meant for us, and us for it; it draws its meaning and importance in the world through the way we relate to it and to each other. As mentioned earlier, it is what we are called to, and being full - - full of the Spirit, full in the body, full in the soul - - is the way we can live that will make us whole. It is why some versions of The Beatitudes are written “Happy are” as compared to “Blessed are;” the word “happy” is closer in meaning in the Hebrew than “blessing.” More is implied. However, we are reading and writing in Greek here, but it’s good to know where and how things originate.

If one looks up today's text on The Internet (as I did), the corresponding texts and information relate almost entirely to the "blessings" and spend very little time with the "woes. This makes finding a corresponding modern-day version hard to come upon, as most of the bible quotations are taken from the "blessing" sections and how Matthew and Luke relate, and want very little or nothing to do with the "woes" section. Yet there are a few preludes to the entire passage that I find helpful. Here is one by writer Jackie Trottman that I found particularly pertinent. She writes "I have heard pastors say that the sermon on the mount should really be called the teaching on the mount. (The

original is found in Matthew Chapter 5 and is also called The Beatitudes.) I imagine Jesus saying these words in a modern-day version.

Before he would speak, however, he would tell everyone to turn off their electronic devices. I'm sure there would be people snapping pictures and posting to social media and tweeting. But, he would encourage people to unplug from those devices for just a little while. I wouldn't be surprised if he would also lead the group in a guided meditation to clear thoughts of the day, to be fully present, and to empty the mind in order to receive his message. He would then probably offer a short prayer much like our pastor says. It would be something

along the lines of, “Dear Heavenly Father, help us to open our hearts, our minds, and our imagination to these words.”<sup>v</sup>

As we do so, I wonder why the editors/redactors of the bible found it necessary and important to include two versions of such a strong vision for Christian living. Granted they were using the same text (called “Q) that neither Mark nor John were using, but what agenda did each have that gave them the authority to tell their version of this most important of sermons? It seems they had a lot in common. Wikipedia tells us that “While Matthew groups Jesus' teachings into sets of similar material, the same material is scattered when found in Luke. The

Sermon on the Mount may be compared with the similar but more succinct Sermon on the Plain as recounted by the Gospel of Luke), which occurs at the same moment in Luke's narrative, and also features Jesus heading up a mountain, but giving the sermon on the way down at a level spot. Some scholars believe that they are the same sermon, while others hold that Jesus frequently preached similar themes in different places.”<sup>vi</sup>

Two interesting things to consider regarding *Wikipedia's* explanation. First, the Sermon on the Mount takes place going up the hill, the Sermon on the Plain while going down or at the base of the hill. Is this to say that one (TSOTM)

has priority over the other; it is longer, but is it more insightful? Second, the language (happy/blessing vs. woe) varies; obviously that implies there is an agenda (and I think each has one.) Of course, *Wikipedia* is not the be-all of biblical scholarship, but it often offers a good overview, as it does here...

That's more about blessings and woes than one might like to carry for one week. In conclusion, I offer this contemporary Franciscan version of The Beatitudes, Matthew-style that I hope will seal the deal, so to speak until we meet The Beatitudes again. Inspired by *Laudato Si'*, it proclaims:

1. Blessed are those who heal the wounded earth for they will be restored to right relationship with all of Creation.

2. Blessed are those who hold the space for dialogue with the natural world, God, and each other, for they will hear the fullness of life.

3. Blessed are those who repent for life lost at human hands, for they will be forgiven by the Cosmic Christ.

4. Blessed are those who enter into relationship with the natural world, for they will know the intrinsic value of all of God's Creation

5. Blessed are those who discern the voice of Creation for they will receive the will of God in a language not our own.

6. Blessed are those with who see with the eyes of their heart for their vision will imagine the potential for new life to emerge.

7. Blessed are those who nurture the needs of the living and nonliving world, for they will be nourished in body and spirit.

8. Blessed are those who live simply, for their discipline will bring harmony with the rhythms of life.

9. Blessed are those who cultivate a life of prayer for they will know an inner cosmos that honors the outer world.

10. Blessed are those who participate in civil affairs for they will bring the cry and song of the earth to systems of power and policy.

11. Blessed are those who practice gratitude for they will receive the gift of abundance.

May you take from any of these words and thoughts given today and use them in your private meditations and prayers.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.  
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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.aplainaccount.org/luke-617-26/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.delawareonline.com/storynews/2014/12/18>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hunger>

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> <https://guidedchristianmeditation.com/2431/inspirational-bible-verses/a-modern-day-version-of-the-sermon-on-the-mount/>

<sup>vivi</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon\\_on\\_the\\_Mount#Comparison\\_with\\_the\\_Sermon\\_on\\_the\\_Plain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon_on_the_Mount#Comparison_with_the_Sermon_on_the_Plain)