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Plain Speaking
A sermon on Luke 6:17-26
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Before our Gospel reading today, we have some “splainin” to do. Last week, Pat preached on the story of Jesus calling the first disciples. Since that miraculous catch of fish, Jesus has been busy teaching and healing everywhere he goes. With all the people he’s healed, and all the delightfully outrageous things he’s said to the Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus has officially become a BIG DEAL.

One day, Jesus goes up a mountain, and spends the whole night in prayer to God. After which, Jesus calls his disciples around him, and out of this group, which may well have been a hundred people or more—he picks twelve. These will be his apostles: Peter, Andrew, James, John, and all the rest. Today’s reading picks up immediately after Jesus chooses these twelve men (read Luke 6:17-26) . . .

Today’s scripture is the beginning of what is commonly known as “The Sermon on the Plain,” similar to the more famous “Sermon on the Mount” in the Gospel of Matthew. In seminary they teach you, don’t smush all the Gospels together and try to harmonize every detail into one comprehensive narrative about the life of Jesus. Let each one speak in its own voice. Let Luke be Luke, and let Matthew be Matthew. But now that I have been to the site of the Sermon on the Mount, it’s easy for me to see how the same place could be both a mountain and a level place. Because the area all around Galilee is hilly. In fact, most of Israel feels like an ocean of hills. The place where Jesus probably preached these words is a beautiful wide open space, high up in the hills on the (northern) side of the Sea of Galilee. Trees bursting with hot pink and vivid orange flowers are growing up there. We could look down from the church that has been built there, and see fields of date palms and olive trees, and Galilee itself, sparkling in

the sunlight. Even full of tourists, there's a tangible sense of peace and tranquility up there. It's the kind of spot where you'd like to stay for a while.

But even though the place may be the same, there are subtle yet important differences in the beatitudes according to Luke compared with the more famous beatitudes of Matthew.

Matthew's version is longer. Matthew doesn't list any woes, which is probably one reason his version is more popular. Matthew's Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," whereas Luke's Jesus is more direct: "Blessed are you who are poor."

Speaking of poor . . . when you heard these words of Jesus read aloud a moment ago, how did you hear them? Did you hear them as someone who is poor, or as someone who is rich? Or did you have a feeling of, "I don't know where I fit in"?

I've been reflecting on those words "rich" and "poor." Did you know that the Pew Research Center has created an online calculator, where you can go and type in your state, your city, your household income before taxes, and the number of people in your household? And they will tell you if you are in the lower, middle, or upper income for your area, as well as the percentage of adults who are in each income bracket in your area. In general, depending on where you live, you have to have a family income between \$45,000 and \$135,000 before taxes to be officially middle income for a three-person household. In Topeka, you only have to bring in \$41,000 for a family of three to be middle income, or just over \$120,000 to be upper income. And no matter where you live, if you make more than \$350,000, you are not just upper income, you are RICH (according to Stephen Rose, of the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute).

That's in the United States. I often think back to when I was barely, barely, barely on the lower end of middle income as a single mom, making about \$30,000 a year in 2002 as a single

mom with two little girls, and even then I had more than many of the villagers I met in Kenya, since I had electricity, running water, and health care, and family who could help me if things ever really got bad.

In Jesus' day, most people were low income. There was no middle class. The rich were viewed with suspicion, because the worldview at that time was that wealth was one big limited pie that could not get any bigger. If one person had a bigger slice, that meant there was less for everybody else. An honorable life was one in which you maintained the slice of pie you were given. It would be dishonorable to take more, or to lose what you had. To be truly poor in Jesus' time meant not only material poverty, but more importantly, that you could not maintain what little you had, because you were socially disadvantaged: maybe blind, or lame, or sick, or a widow, or an orphan. Scholar Bruce Malina specializes in writing about the worldview of eastern Mediterranean people at the time of Jesus, and he concludes that a better way to understand the terms rich and poor as Jesus uses them are "greedy" vs. "weak."

We don't see "rich" and "poor" quite the same way today—today we'd be more likely to describe rich people as successful, hard-working, smart, and fortunate. Today, it seems more common to view the POOR with suspicion. We might see a homeless person on the street and wonder, what bad choices did they make that they ended up like this?

Now, as a reminder, we are spending this winter exploring our church's new mission statement. Let's say it together: "Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose." We're specifically focusing on "living with purpose." Living with purpose as followers of Jesus means we try to live as Jesus lived, and do the things he did and taught.

Jesus gives us guidance in this story, but it might not be what we think. Notice that Jesus never says, "Be poor," or "Don't be rich." He comes down from the hillside and stands with that

crowd of people who so badly want to get close to him. The first words out of his mouth are words of BLESSING. You who don't have enough, you whose hearts feel like somebody ripped it out of your body and threw it on a burning hot sidewalk and started stomping on it with spiky boots, you who don't measure up, you who the rest of the world looks at and wonders what you did wrong, you are BLESSED. You whom the world does not honor, I honor.

Jesus is living out that mission statement he announced back in Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." That good news is, you are blessed. You are precious in God's sight. You will be filled, and healed, and honored, and you will celebrate.

And to the rich, whether it's people who have mega millions, or people who simply have more than enough, more than they need, Jesus doesn't scold. He just says, "I'm going to tell it like it is. You are going to have a tough time, because you are comfortable. You have a low tolerance for hunger pangs. You are used to getting your way. You're used to being catered to and praised. You have assets to protect, and property to preserve. You have more to lose, yet the willingness to lose everything is essential to following me."

For us today, who want to live with purpose, there are four things we can take away from this story: First, a renewed commitment to honoring and respecting the poor and the hungry, regardless of how they got that way. [God doesn't care how they got that way, so we don't need to worry about it, either.]

Second, I want to acknowledge that some of us in this room may be struggling financially right now. And it's awful, and discouraging, and we feel beaten down, not blessed. And we don't talk about it, because we're ashamed. If that's your situation, these words of Jesus are for YOU. You will be vindicated, and you will know abundance.

Third, some of us are fortunate enough to have more than we need. Some of us might even be rich. We can be grateful for and generous with what we have. And oh, so very MINDFUL. Because when our stomachs and bank accounts are full, it's so easy to feel like we deserve it, we've earned it, and it's ours, and that is not a feeling that draws us near to God. We will almost always want to play it safe. And it is astonishing how easy it is to make excuses not to share more of what we have (Sense and Sensibility).

Finally, no matter what our economic status, we are conduits of blessing. Each and every one of us. It is through US that God wants to honor the poor, fill the hungry, and comfort those who weep. God calls US to take the kinds of risks that expose us to ridicule and criticism.

I believe that God wants to bless you right now, today, in some way that you particularly need to be blessed. I don't know if it's a word of encouragement, or a gift, or a challenge, a moment of beauty, or a flash of insight, but there is a blessing for you today, and every day, if you will receive it. And I believe that God wants to bless someone THROUGH you today, through your prayers, your song, your cookies, your smile, your offering, SOMETHING. You have a blessing within you that needs to be delivered, and only you can deliver it. I believe this about each one of us, and I believe this about our church. May we continue to be blessed as we have been so richly for the past 160 years, and may we continue to bless, bless, bless. Amen!