

Luke 6: 17 - 26

2/13/22

Welcome to the Gospel of Luke, who writes a Gospel that proclaims Good News for the last, the least, and the lost in society. The last, the least and the lost - this is the shorthand description that seminary students and ministers use to organize their thinking about the Gospel. We will spend considerable time with the Gospel of Luke in the weeks and months ahead, so I thought I would provide you with this key to understanding Luke's intent in his Gospel. Some of his Gospel will be familiar to us, such as the story of the Good Samaritan, who is the last person conventional wisdom of the day said would stop to help the beaten Hebrew along the side of the road; the story of the Prodigal Son, who when he comes to his senses, plans to ask his father to be treated as one of the least of the household staff, that and; and the story of the shepherd who leaves the flock of 99 to search out and find the one lost sheep.

Some of the Gospel will be less familiar, maybe discomfoting, and upsetting, such as the short, but very sharply pointed list of Woes we heard read, which is clearly by design. Like Matthew, Luke has his list of blessings, but the list of woes is unique to Luke. It is special to Luke because, and as we know from the opening verses of the Gospel, Luke writes to an imaginary character named Theophilus, or Friend of God. His primary audience are likely to be educated non Hebrews - Gentiles - with knowledge of other cultures in Asia Minor, Palestine and perhaps Rome. In other words, those who are rich, who are full now, who laugh aloud in polite society. In contrast to the Theophilus types who would read his Gospel, there were also the poor heard the Good News, the poor and the hungry (and this means more than physical hunger, but a deep almost spiritual yearning also), those who weep, weep for grief, with frustration at injustice, with despair that nothing seems to change.

The last, the least, the lost. The blessings are given to the last, the least and the lost, all of those who came out of Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sido to be healed of their diseases; the ones troubled with unclean spirits sought to be in his presence because power came out from him. Troubled souls. Which brings me to the story of Bruce. Not his real name - a real person but Bruce is not his real name.

Bruce lived in the neighborhood. You could see him walking past the church every day, with a little bounce to his step, talking to singing to himself. He was mentally challenged and was always in worship Sunday morning. He never failed to attend worship. He spoke with me, and others, every Sunday and his stories made absolutely no sense; but he told them with a smile on his face and with great enthusiasm. He was loved by the congregation, until Bruce stopped taking his medication. No one knew this he began to kiss the women of the congregation on the mouth! You can imagine how quickly attitudes changed! There is no blame there; no blame at all. I dealt with reactions that ranged from he should be arrested for assault (and he could have been) to asking what had happened to him to I never want to see him in this church again. I was given the task to sort this out.

I visited the group home where Bruce lived, not far from the church. I met with him and the house manager, explaining the situation. The house manager simply asked Bruce, "Have you stopped taking your medication?" He answered yes, without hesitation or embarrassment. I set

out the ground rules. Bruce was to stay on his medication regimen. If he went off his meds and acted out again, he would not be allowed to return to worship.

I deputized a few people in the congregation to monitor his behavior when he was in worship even when he was on his medications.

He was not allowed in the church when I wasn't there so that the woman in the office felt safe. He stopped by once a week or so and we would stand in the outside entrance to talk for a bit, then he moved on. When I wasn't in, he wasn't allowed in. He readily agreed (he was back on his meds) and he was not a bother to anyone afterwards. This was not a situation with an easy answer. There was an easy answer if you are well off, enjoying your life in the company of like minded people just like yourself. But this was a congregation that wanted to be Christian for all involved - Bruce and the women of the church.

This was far from a perfect resolution. The more perfect resolution would have involved the healing of Bruce as the church prayed and laid hands on him, restoring him to health and acceptable social behavior. Of course, better medication could also have been a part of the resolution. The more perfect resolution would have involved authentic forgiveness by those whom he offended, restoring Bruce to the community where God had placed him. There were those who did not forgive Bruce, as we can easily understand and frankly, accept. Forgiveness was to be their decision. Such a more perfect resolution would have been strong markings that the kingdom of God had broken through with power and authority, casting out Bruce's demons and creating a new community of faithfulness. But the kingdom is not yet here in all its wonder and delight, and we are not the whole and complete creatures we will be when that day comes.

But it did accomplish this - Bruce received blessing from God through his participation in worship and fellowship, with its limits and restrictions; but I haven't a clue if this blessing was actually true. I believe so, or I want to believe so. His mental illness was severe. I never really understood anything he said. For the congregation, we stayed connected to one of the last, least and lost, and sacrificed a little bit of our comfort, a little of their peace, and accepted a little bit of chaos on a Sunday morning than we would have chosen for ourselves. This may have been a small sacrifice but it was significant because we wanted to avoid the list of woes of Luke's Gospel.

This is messy, but the Christian world is messy! Out there in the world, the rules that govern are more stark and much less forgiving. It is more red or green, up or down, this or that, healthy or mentally challenged, safe or at risk. But here, the boundary between those who receive blessings and those who receive warnings is blurred. No one wanted to become like Bruce in order to be blessed by God! That is not what the Beatitudes are about! Here we understand that loving one another is not romantic or pretty, sometimes, but loving one another is of God. The community of faith formed around the sacrifice of Christ will struggle, sometimes, to make visible the promise of glory revealed in Jesus. But, the struggle is worth it, and sometimes we catch a glimpse of what lies ahead. Amen.