

Luke 6: 17-26 "Plain Talk" Rev. Janet Chapman 2/17/19

So last Wednesday morning, I, like so many of you woke up to a huge surprise. We, who had been watching our brothers and sisters in Washington, the Midwest and Northeast battle "snow-mageddon," suddenly found ourselves knee deep in the midst of it all...literally. We who had been secretly smiling to ourselves saying thank goodness we don't live there, now were wondering where can we get a snow shovel? Orchard Supply was selling them for \$2 back in the last few days of their going out of business sale... I and others walked by them smirking, "Yep, glad I don't live somewhere that I'll ever need that." And so the joke is on us, as we just survived one of the top 5 snowstorms Redding has ever seen. To me, it was a not so gentle reminder to be careful what I boast about...it just might come back to bite me in the back end.

A story is told of 3 year old Katie who was sitting at the edge of the preschool yard weeping. She was looking longingly at a group of other preschoolers in a tight circle at the end of the playground playing with what looked like black and white kittens from afar. The teacher came over to Katie to find out what was wrong and discovered the children had made fun of her dirty clothes and torn tennis shoes and said she couldn't play with them or the newfound kittens. The teacher was disturbed by their mean behavior and likewise curious about where the kittens had come from. She headed over to the corner of the yard to see what was going on. There she saw the children playing with the cutest 6 mos. old... baby skunks you'd ever seen. She was instantly terrified and screamed, "Run, children, run!" It so terrified the kids that each grabbed a skunk and bolted off in a different direction. As she yelled, "No!," each child, in utter fear, squeezed their baby skunk even harder. Tears started flowing from the children who promptly dropped their furry friends and tried to run far from the stink, but it was too late. What goes around comes around, my Grandma Thrasher used to say.

Grandma Thrasher was known for her plain talk – she didn't mince words. Maybe she learned it from Luke's portrayal of Jesus, who is all about telling it like it is. In our text, the Jesus has spent all night on a mountain praying, then he comes down and stands on a flat piece of land called the plain, to talk plainly to his followers. In Matthew's version which we know as the Beatitudes, Jesus stays on the mountain. Luke puts Jesus right down in the middle of us where he can feel what we feel. Turns out that geographically speaking, it could have been a little of both. The location of Tiberias has a high hill on it where the Chapel of the Beatitudes now stands as well as a long, sloping side that swoops down to the sea. The hollow of that hill makes a natural amphitheater – a fine, flat place with hills all around to bounce the sound back. So it is a mount and a plain all rolled into one. Who is to say that Jesus didn't roam a bit and speak from both the hill and the plain? However, Luke zeroes in on the plain because to him, Jesus is the one who mingles with the crowd on their level, and can see up close their suffering.

These are common folk who have come to Jesus because they have heard he is approachable and willing to help. If you could just get his attention, there was no telling what might happen to you. Some even said he could help set your business straight, just like with that local fisherman, Simon Peter, who had nothing to show for a whole night's work. When Jesus told him to toss his nets back in the water, he did it, and before he knew it, he had more fish than he could fit in his boat. There was apparently nothing Jesus couldn't do. To make contact with him was the 1st century equivalent of winning the lottery, or at least that was the word going around. It was why they were all trying to touch him, which made it even more remarkable that he remained on the plain, where they could all get to him. He stood among them preaching a silent sermon by his presence before he even opened his mouth.

But when he did open his mouth, what came out was some strong, forthright plain talk about life within the realm of God. Using this very common form of speech, the people expected Jesus to bestow some nugget of wisdom on them like “Blessed are they who floss, for they shall keep their teeth,” something like that. But instead they are shocked by what follows. “Blessed are you...who are poor... who are hungry...who weep.” “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man.” Hearing this was like tasting what you thought was sugar and it turns out to be salt, like playing with kittens that turn out to be skunks. It was a shocking substitution of good things for bad, in which blessedness was equated with the very things people avoided – poverty, hunger, grief, hatred. Then Luke adds four “woe-itudes” that only Luke seems to know about. They were mirror images of the beatitudes, in which woe was equated with things that people did their best to achieve – wealth, food, laughter, and esteem. In the same way that Jesus made the bad things sound good, he made the good things sound bad. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.” Since we are so used to them by now, we have sort of lost their shock value but it would be like saying, “Blessed are you who suffer from cancer, for you shall be made whole” or “Woe to you who drive new cars, for you shall walk on foot,” or “Woe to you with college degrees, for you have received your reward.” As you might guess, our reactions to these statements has everything to do with who we are. If you happen to be one of the hungry, Jesus has some good news. If you happen to be one of the well-fed, it sounds pretty bad.

It is probably fair to say that most of us hear these words from the well-fed spectrum and thus we tend to feel pretty guilty. Our guilt pushes us to think we must sell all we own and

give to the poor or maybe we just file it away as another passage that no one we know has ever achieved or followed. The catch is that beatitudes are not advice. The language Jesus uses is not imperative here, which means there is no hint of telling anyone what they should do. Instead, Jesus describes different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. Barbara Brown Taylor likens it to a ferris wheel that goes around, so that those who are swaying at the top, with the wind in their hair and all the world's lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down there right now, where all they can see are candy wrappers in the sawdust, will have their chance to touch the stars. It is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone on that wheel.

Maybe it is the blessing and woe language that trips us up. We equate it with "reward" and "punishment." The blessing things must be what he wants us to do, and the woe things must be what he doesn't want us to do, only where does that leave you, exactly? Find somewhere to weep in hopes you can move from one list to the other? Blessings and woes can't be manipulated like that and neither can God. The beatitudes don't tell us what to do, they tell us who we are, and more importantly, they tell us who Jesus is. Anyone who was there that day on the plain to win the lottery could go on home. Jesus was not any good for that. In fact, people who were attached to that kind of servant of God's were in for some woes, because the way things are is not the way they will always be, and no one gets to stay at the top of the wheel forever. What goes round, comes round. It is God's own truth, and it is pure blessedness for those on the bottom, who never really expected to get their feet off the ground

in the first place. It is also pure blessedness for those on the top, because there are some vitally important things about life on earth that you simply cannot see with your feet so far off the ground. To get a good look at them, you have to come down, as Jesus did, from the mountain to the plain. Things may not look as pretty from down there. You may see things that make you cry, but your grief may teach you more than your good fortune ever did. Neither the going up nor the coming down is under our control, as far as I can tell, but wherever we happen to be, the promise is the same. Blessed are you who loose your grip on the way things are, for God shall lead you in the way things shall be.