

Sunday, February 13, 2022

**“Plain Words”**

Luke 6:17-26

Psalm 1

By Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

*Jesus’ sermon on the plain catches us off guard by inverting the expectations of the world even as they reveal the presence of God with those who suffer.*

As far as I can guess, twenty-three years of preaching translates into one thousand and fifty-eight sermons. That includes time off for good behavior – vacations and guest preachers. If you want a more accurate figure, you’ll have to come and help me count. In any case, they amount to pages and pages of words and sentences, ideas and stories aimed at taking seriously the scriptures. I have tried to avoid the pitfalls of weaponizing scripture to attack, or twisting them out of context. William Willimon says that among the most frequent pitfalls of modern preaching is moralizing the text: that is, drawing simple moral inferences that become ideals for practical Christian living. Willimon writes that this unintentionally puts us “in the place of God in the scripture, stresses people’s misdeeds more than God’s deeds, and talks about what we should do rather than what God is doing.”<sup>1</sup>

A friend jokingly told me last year that the reason I have not been more successful as a writer is that I’ve not published “Seven Ways to Be A Happier Christian,” or “Eleven Steps to Having the Perfect Church.”

So maybe I should try the moralizing approach and title my next book “1,058 Ways To Get To Sleep Fast.”

What continues to draw me to the work of preaching is the conviction that, as Psalm 1 puts it, grounding one’s life in the story of scripture roots one deep into the rich, loamy soil of God’s presence. Scripture is the story we proclaim together, a story of God’s passionate love for us, a story of God’s desire to bring us healing and hope, a story of a God who yearns to repair the brokenness and despair that is all around us.

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, *A Guide To Preaching and Leading Worship*, p. 60.

Yet, too often, however, we have neglected sharing that story, and have allowed other stories to proliferate. We have not shared the wisdom and riches of God's love story, or perhaps have not told it plainly or with sufficient authority.

As plainly as I can say it, scripture is a story of a God who will not give up on us. And the challenge of preaching that story, as Frederick Buechner once observed, is to put "the Gospel into words not the way you would compose an essay but the way you would write a poem or a love letter—putting your heart into it, your own excitement, most of all your own life. It is to speak words that you hope may, by grace, be bearers not simply of new understanding but of new life both for the ones you are speaking to and also for you."<sup>2</sup>

The challenge is to allow the sharpness of this story refresh us while also opening us to a new encounter with the one who makes all things new.

And that is the challenge in Jesus' sermon on the plain. He points us in an entirely new direction, challenges us to stretch our imagination to see something we may not have noticed before. Brian McLaren, in talking about Jesus' miracle stories, says that the stories challenge us to consider impossible possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

To preach is to wonder, "What shall I say?" To hear is to wonder, "What shall we do?"

I wondered about those questions the other night. It was just past midnight, and I found myself standing on an icy, dark driveway. Two persons I had just met, stood with me, anxiously looking toward the house. Inside, police were trying to figure out what caused their sister, the only person living at the house, to die. They did not need the police to tell them, however, because within their hearts they knew the answer. They knew, though they could hardly say it, that their sister's history of addiction had claimed her life. I wondered, "What does the good news sound like to them?"

I have wondered that question often over the years. And you have as well. Standing at the moment of death, or in the wake of a personal struggle, we have asked, "What does it mean to be a tree, rooted in God's love here and now?" We have asked it together on mission projects, looking into the eyes of the poor, the

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/12/18/what-preaching-is>

<sup>3</sup> McLaren, "We Make The Road By Walking," p. 97.

hungry, the ignored. We have asked it of each other when our families have been through the wringer of stress and tension, or when our world was shaken to its core. “What does the good news sound like?”

Jesus says it sounds something like this: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh; Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you...”

These are the words that ground our lives, even as they challenge us.

As familiar as these words are, they challenge, or perhaps even perhaps even confound us. We are more accustomed to hearing the longer version in Matthew. Among other differences, Luke’s list is shorter, with four positive Beatitudes coupled with four negative “woes.” These words are familiar, but they are also disruptive and challenging because when we hear Jesus say, “woe to you who are full,” we suddenly understand that his is not speaking about eating too much food during the Super Bowl. Jesus is not referring to those who have consumed too many nachos and chicken wings.

Instead, he seems to be taking aim at those – perhaps like us – whose lives are comfortable, filled with conveniences and comforting possession. In Luke, Jesus stands on this level place and levels with the disciples and all who surround him, reminding them that those who have nothing actually have all they need.

Jesus, according to Luke, speaks these words on level ground. He is leveling with the people who have followed him, having appointed his disciples and commissioned them with the task of sharing the Good News. This is a version of the same sermon Matthew calls the Sermon on the Mount. Here, however, Jesus does not speak from the mountain. He comes down from the mountain to a “level place,” a place where people were gathered, where a great multitude of persons had come longing to be healed.

He addresses them not from the vantage of a mountain-top pulpit, but from the floor of the sanctuary. He mingles with the brokenhearted, the grieving, the poor, the hungry. And he speaks plainly to them in words that likely sounded as strange to them as they do to us.

This vision of life sounds strange to us, perhaps even insulting. His words are awkward to our ears because Jesus turns the world upside down: those who have nothing are the ones who are most happy, those who are defamed are the ones who will laugh. It makes no sense, then or now, how this is to happen, but Jesus says it is the cornerstone of his kingdom.

Indeed, they may even be painful. Standing outside that house the other night, it would have been inappropriate – even ghastly – to say to those who were grieving, “You know you are blessed, don’t you?” It is inappropriate for us to say, “Well, everything happens for a reason.”

In fact, some scholars suggest that a quick reading of these scriptures might lead to an indictment that Jesus words only seem to be encouraging people to hold on for some eternal reward at an indefinite point in the future.

Yet a closer look reminds us that Jesus is mingling with the despairing of the world. He is preaching not from an elegantly crafted pulpit, but from the messiness of broken human life. He is reminding God’s people, “things are not always what they seem.”

Moreover, throughout Luke wealth is never directly condemned by Jesus. His only concern is that it tramples on the poor and keeps us from seeing our deepest needs.

So, listen to Jesus. Listen as he shapes our understanding of how God is at work in the world. Listen to how he is calling us to respond to those who are poor, to the hungry, to the excluded. He is offering us a story that we can tell to those who have nothing—not in a way that chases away their pain, nor ignores their need, but says, “Here, taste this bread. Drink this cup. Know you are loved.”

Listen to Jesus’ plain words and allow them to shape your response to our world. There is power in these words, if we are paying attention. Amen.