

Plain-ly Faithful

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This morning's second reading is one of the epic narratives of Jesus – one of those ministry-defining texts both for Jesus and for so many of his followers

Countless ministries and people point to the Beatitudes as their inspiration and guide for how to be and what to value in the world

Luke's version is a bit more cut throat than Matthew's version – which is the more well-known version

For instance: Luke's version takes place on the plain – “a level place” – rather than on the mountain top as in Matthew's gospel

Ronald Allen, former preaching professor, notes in his commentary that “The word ‘level’ [in the Bible] often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning (see Jeremiah 9:22; 14:18; 30:4; Daniel 3:1; Joel 1:10, 20; 2: 22; 3:19; Habakkuk 3:17; Zechariah 12:11). Jesus,” he writes, “teaches the way of the Realm in the midst of the world as such a level place”¹

Harsh!

Another contrast: In Luke's version, he writes, simply, that Jesus says “blessed are the poor” not, as Matthew puts it, “blessed are the poor in spirit”

No, as Damon Garcia writes in his commentary for *Enfleshed Ministries*, “Jesus is talking about material conditions. In Jesus's redefining of who matters, matter itself matters. Jesus doesn't say the poor are blessed because of internal qualities, such as being human, or having a divine soul, or being loved by God. Rather, they are blessed because of the external qualities of their material conditions.”²

“Blessed are you who are poor,” poor! “for yours is the kingdom of God.”

And then there's the whole section of “woes” – Matthew's version doesn't include woes, he doesn't go there

It's no wonder, then, that Matthew's version is the better known version

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-617-26>

² <https://enfleshed.com/>

Luke's version is no less stunning, but these little differences – the sermon on the level place, blessed are the poor, the woes – creates a text that puts things in a perspective and gets us thinking

“ooo, I love this story, but wait....where do I fall? blessing or woe?”

And that's not a benign question, where we fall – blessing or woe – it feels about like we're asking: “am I in the right? Or, am I in the wrong?”

Not for nothing, I think this is exactly where Jesus wants us to be: in the midst of that hard question “where am I?”

Once again, I feel like the gospel this morning is preaching to a gap

Last week, I talked a bit about that gap of our faithfulness between Simon Peter's response of: “we've been out all night and have caught nothing” and “but if you say so, I will”

And this week, Luke is preaching to a faithful gap, too – that gap between blessing and woe, between right and wrong, to the question of where am I?

Don't get me wrong, I think there is some direct messaging here as well

I think Jesus is absolutely preaching to the margins of our society with very important messaging – blessed are you who are poor, you who are hungry, you who weep, you who are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed; and woe to you who are rich, who are full now, who laugh, and who are acclaimed

But I think Jesus was also preaching to those of us on the plain, the level place, in the middle

Sure there may be times when we find ourselves at one of those marginal places – we have all experienced sorrow and grief, and I know you all well enough to know there are times when you laugh

But most of us are not 100% in the pit, nor are we 100% at the top of the mountain – very few humans are (besides aren't some of these categories relative!)

Most of us, and most of who Jesus was preaching to, reside in the plain – in that faithful middle place

To me, that's the middle of the binary of blessing and woe, or right and wrong... faithful

Faithful is where we reside

And Jesus' sermon is giving us the lenses we need to see the world and our paths on our life's journeys from this faithful space

Jesus wants us to gaze at the extremes – and to be honest we already do, but Jesus' sermon reminds us that our gaze, when left to our own devices, is flipped, the lenses are distorted: left to our own devices, we say “blessed are the wealthy and blessed is richness and prosperity” “woe to the poor are lazy and who work for nothing, woe to the migrant who by virtue of your journey you committed a crime.”

And we orient so much of our lives, our communities, our political structures around this world view

Jesus' sermon is meant to be a record scratch, a hit the brakes, a hold the phone kind of moment for us on the plain to recognize that for God that view and order of the world is flipped

And this is wildly disorienting for us on the plain

Frederick Buechner summarizes this disorientation when he wrote: “The world says, ‘Mind your own business,’ and Jesus says, ‘There is no such thing as your own business.’ The world says, ‘Follow the wisest course and be a success,’ and Jesus says, ‘Follow me and be crucified.’ The world says, ‘Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own’ — and Jesus says, ‘Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’ The world says, ‘Law and order,’ and Jesus says, ‘Love.’ The world says, ‘Get’ and Jesus says, ‘Give.’ In terms of the world's sanity,” he writes, “Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.”³

Laboring under a cross is wildly disorienting, but the process of reorienting our lives, our communities, our political structures under the cross - under Jesus' message - under God's love is our faithful calling on the plain

If we find ourselves feeling badly hearing Jesus' message this morning and feeling concerned about where we stand in this binary of blessings and woes, good and bad, perhaps it is because being disoriented from God's vision *doesn't* feel good and we know it

Jesus' message is not meant to blame, it is meant to free and to inspire

Jesus' message is to speak to that faithful gap in our relationships with God and in our relationships with God's creation so that we might be reconciled

Jesus' message is meant to disorient and discomfort so that we might reorient and reconcile ourselves and the systems in our care to God's vision

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3319-leveled>

In his latest email to the clergy, our Bishop, Thomas Brown, spoke of the weariness many of us are feeling right now induced by the fear in our political and social climate

A weariness that to me feels similar to the weariness I feel when I hear Jesus' sermon on the plain – the weariness of recognizing that gap in my relationship with God and my relationship with God's creation, when I realize that being a follower of Jesus asks me to reorient the gaze I have on the world and flips it right on its head

Rather than preaching a sermon into the weariness of that gap in my heart, the Bishop shared a poem that for me, this time, was a balm and inspiration.

And I share that poem now in conclusion.

BECAUSE, by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

So I can't save the world— can't save even myself, can't wrap my arms around every frightened child, can't foster peace among nations, can't bring love to all who feel unlovable.

So I practice opening my heart right here in this room and being gentle with my insufficiency.

I practice walking down the street heart first.

And if it is insufficient to share love, I will practice loving anyway.

I want to converse about truth, about trust. I want to invite compassion into every interaction.

One willing heart can't stop a war.

One willing heart can't feed all the hungry.

And sometimes, daunted by a task too big, I tell myself what's the use of trying?

But today, the invitation is clear: to be ridiculously courageous in love.

To open the heart like a lilac in May, knowing freeze is possible and opening anyway.

To take love seriously.

To give love wildly.

To race up to the world as if I were a puppy, adoring and unjaded, stumbling on my own exuberance.

To feel the shock of indifference, of anger, of cruelty, of fear, and stay open.

To love as if it matters, as if the world depends on it.

— From "The Unfolding" (Wildhouse Publishing, Boston, MA, 2024)