

Sermon – The good with the bad

The Gospel this morning offers some familiar words, doesn't it? Jesus' message is meant for comfort - a balm to mend the weary soul: Blessed are you who are poor, or hungry; who weep, or are hated - and just as other potential points of blessing seem ready to reveal themselves, Luke's gospel does something different.

Luke tells us Jesus offers the inverse of the list of blessings; Woe to you who are rich, or full, or laughing, or praised.

We're not ready for this - but secretly, we like it. It gives us options, and a way to categorize the people who fill our lives and confuse our loyalties

But I wonder, is Jesus offering us a choice, or a challenge. Is this list an ultimatum? A clever way to organize communities into spiritual categories? Or is it something else?

It is hard not to hear Jesus' words as anything but a binary choice; Good or bad; blessed or damned; which will it be?

The Psalmist offers the hope that good will triumph, and the wicked will be 'like chaff the wind drives away,' but that hope seems never to be realized - not in the Psalmist's time, nor in ours. In fact, the number of choices, attitudes, conflicts and misery available to us seems to grow exponentially with each sunrise. Each with their own champion; each making some claim of 'truth.' Nations, political movements, groups with related business interests, individuals - all seem to have a position, which they outline in loud, bold terms (because the louder you are, the more influence you have)

And in today's social climate, it is tempting to find ways to manipulate Jesus' words in order to put our opponents in the 'column of woe.' We want the line between good and bad; righteous and sinner; us and them - to be very clear. But I'll invite you to consider the treatment that Luke's gospel gives this particular sermon of Jesus as a 'both-and' moment, rather than 'either-or.'

The setting is important to my argument. A 'level plain' surrounded by great crowds - not high atop a mountain with folks clamouring at his feet - Jesus is among this vast, diverse crowd of hurting and hopeful people.

The sermon (such as it is) only comes at the end of a (presumably) long engagement with the wide variety of concerns and complaints represented by the crowd that Luke describes. And Jesus covers both sides of the ledger here, which suggests a wide range of folk make up the in-between space. Luke suggests a very diverse congregation for this particular message - Jesus was the only thing these people have in common. And Jesus acknowledges that it takes all kinds to make a crowd like this - there are a wide variety of circumstances represented in every community, and I think Jesus understands that the message of grace can't reach you if you don't hear yourself included in the conversation.

Religion is typically a great divider. You are saved or not; a member or an adherent (to use the old Presbyterian terms). Our liturgy - the manner of worship - our musical preferences - our rituals and habits - all of these things are designed to be definitive. We teach new members the way to worship - pray - celebrate sacraments - but until you learn these things, they can keep a person apart from the community of faith.

We have joining rituals, of course, but usually they only happen after a period of education in the faith. And while that might include an introduction to Jesus, it most certainly covers a bunch of other stuff that will help you know how to put yourself on the right side of belonging.

Jesus speaks to the in-betweeners. Faithful folk and fallen; the halt and lame; the self-satisfied; those with money and power, and those with none. And this display of familiar human conditions leaves room for everyone to find themselves.

Reading this in preparation, I realized that I am among those in-between right now. Buoyed by my faith, which is tempered by my anger and frustration. I am both rich and poor; full and empty; laughing and crying; and Jesus knows it.

These words help me know myself - and find myself in a crowd with only one thing in common: I'm reminded that whatever else is going on, the people involved are beloved by God, and that includes me and those who I am tempted to count as woeful rather than blessed.

We make those distinctions all the time, but Luke's gospel rendition of this sermon reminds us that it's not our job to categorize. Categories exist - and many more than these - but God's grace and love - God's mercy and peace - God's self and God's son are grand enough for all of them.

Some of us were told as kids that we'd have to learn to take the good with the bad. It's good advice - even better when we see it demonstrated by Jesus - whose list of 'woes' does not keep anyone from God's love. No, quite the opposite. Jesus opened the door to the good and the bad - opened his arms to the wild diversity of human experience - and offered to show us how much we were loved. All of us. No matter what. And that is good news.