

## Where and When?

**Luke 6: 17-26**

**Home Moravian Church, February 16, 2025**

Maybe you have a favorite beatitude. Or maybe you're not sure what a beatitude is. "Beatitude" is the name we give to pronouncements of blessing that Jesus made in the gospels. In some childhood Sunday School you may have memorized "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"—sound familiar? Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled—that was your confirmation text, Lilly Greene, and a darn good one, too.

Those beatitudes are part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount. That collection of Jesus' teachings, in the Gospel of Matthew, was the basis for the community life of our Moravian ancestors in the fifteenth-century Czech kingdom. We have a deep connection to the Sermon on the Mount.

But in today's reading from Luke, which also contains beatitudes, Jesus is not on a mountain. Jesus has, in fact, just come down from a mountain. Luke says that Jesus spent all night on that mountain, praying, and that "when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles." Notice that there was a whole crowd of people Luke called disciples, from whom Jesus chose twelve. That crowd came down the mountain with him, along with "a great multitude" from all around, to a level place, where together they were the audience for what today is called "the sermon on the *plain*."

Imagine that audience forming three circles around Jesus: first, the twelve chosen. Then, a large crowd of the others whom Luke also calls disciples—other people who are following Jesus, listening to his teaching and trying to walk in his way. And finally, that multitude, “from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.” The inclusion of Tyre and Sidon, non-Jewish cities, raises the interesting possibility that the crowd included not just Jews, but Gentiles.

This crowd may also have included both rich and poor—and maybe that’s a novel idea. We can readily imagine Jesus surrounded by the suffering poor, and indeed, it is the poor to whom Jesus first speaks: *Blessed are you who are poor.* We know he sees them because he speaks to them directly: *You.* And he goes on to say: *Yours is the kingdom of God. You will be filled. You will laugh.*

Down the page, Jesus speaks directly to another group: *you who are rich.* Some commentators say that Jesus is just speaking rhetorically; but isn’t it just as possible that Jesus saw in the crowd some people who were well dressed, well fed, obviously well to do? Some well-off people may have come just looking for entertainment. But others... well, rich people need healing, too. As the text says: “*Everyone* in the crowd was trying to touch him.”

But how painful are Jesus’ words for the rich! Not “blessed are you,” but “woe to you.” *Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. You will be hungry. You will mourn and weep.*

This feels like a good time to point out that all those decades ago when you were memorizing the beatitudes, you memorized Matthew’s version. It’s hard to imagine a children’s Sunday School class memorizing Luke’s version. Matthew’s beatitudes are comforting; Luke’s are challenging.

Luke's beatitudes evoke real, physical life. Unlike Matthew's "poor in spirit," Luke's poor are in actual physical poverty. Theirs is not a noble hungering and thirsting after righteousness, but the ordinary, undignified hunger of empty stomachs. Luke's hungry, weeping people are *actual* people, who experience physical deprivation, and who live in a temporal framework, the vivid present of *now* as well as the future that is to come. All of that is challenging.

But Jesus' words to the rich are the most challenging of all—at least for the rich. Because, here's the thing: These words are not conditional. They don't say, "Suffering is coming for you, but *if* you do this or that, you can escape it." As Fred Craddock says—I apologize for bringing up Fred Craddock again, but he wrote a great commentary on Luke—"These are not suggestions about how to be happy or warnings lest one become miserable; blessings and woes as words of Jesus are to be heard with the assurance that they are God's word to us and that God's word is not empty."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' words create a reality, and his listeners are standing in it. We are among those listeners. And we stand confused. Surely the tragedy of the poor and the terrors of the rich place a call on us; and we're listening for it. But we're listening for instructions: "Here is what you must do." Without instructions, how shall we understand our call? We want to stand with Jesus; but we're having trouble finding our footing.

Let's go back to the start of this story, where people gathered around Jesus on that level plain. Think again about the circles. Jesus is at the center; in the circle immediately around him are the chosen twelve. In the outermost circle is that multifarious multitude, Jews and non-Jews, poor and rich, suffering and comfortable. And in that middle circle, between the chosen and the

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke*, in the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 86.

multitude: Didn't we say that's the circle of all the others Luke calls disciples? The many more people who are following Jesus, listening to his teaching and trying to walk in his way? Put me in that circle. I'll stand in there, with *you*, and *you*, and *you*.

You and I, and all the other hopeful disciples: We stand in a reality that Jesus' words have created, asking, what are we called to do? We see what is happening *now*; we hear Jesus' words about *what will be*. But when? And are we supposed to just wait? As we notice that, yes, there are actual poor all around, suffering real physical anguish, hungry and weeping, are we to wait for a someday that they will be filled? As we notice that, yes, there are actual rich, indeed, the world's richest, who are feasting and laughing and running roughshod over the poor, and wait for a someday when they will weep over their choices, as in Luke's parable of Lazarus and the rich man? When is someday? Is there any blessing to be found *now*? What do we do? Where do we stand?

We stand in a reality. Jesus names it, and Jesus calls to us from within it. The call is just like these beatitudes: It is real; it is physical, involving our actual bodies and what we do with them; and it is happening *now*.

Jesus says the poor will be filled, but he doesn't say *at the end of time*. He doesn't say the poor will be filled *when they die and go to heaven*. As he pronounces blessing on the poor, would he expect them to take comfort in some distant tomorrow, or would he be saying they will be filled today? Can he mean that the poor are blessed *today*? And if it's today, who's here to help? I see Jesus looking at a whole crowd of hopeful disciples who are trying to learn and walk in his way.

Meanwhile: the rich. For me, today, this one is harder. I have resources I can share with the poor today. What can I share with the world's richest people, as they feast and laugh and pull

the levers of power? I'm struggling; but, at the same time, I am convinced that the physical reality of our call means something besides "sit back and wait." Maybe all we can share is our voices, crying out, speaking truth to power. Will it make a difference? God's word is not empty; and maybe ours isn't either.

Standing in that middle circle of hopeful disciples, are we not called to turn our faces toward that curious multitude—all those various people who have come to see what Jesus is all about? The people of all faiths and no faith, the poor and the rich, the curious and even the mocking. Of course, if our circle turns toward the crowd, then Jesus and the chosen twelve are behind us, but that's okay—we know they have our backs. And now we can see who's out there. And now—*now*—we can get to work.

In that middle circle, standing between Jesus and the multitude, we hopeful disciples are in a position to connect one to the other, right here and now. Our call is not to wait, but to live as disciples in the present reality. We are called to ministry both to the poor, in the form of empowering, and the rich, in the form of speaking truth to power. Blessing and woe are real *today*. Where are we standing? Between Jesus and the world. When are we supposed to get busy? *Now*.

Both Luke and Matthew make it clear: our ministry is not easy. Both gospels include, in their beatitudes, a blessing for those who are—as Luke puts it—excluded, reviled, and defamed on account of the Son of Man. But both gospels say that when this happens to us, we are supposed to *rejoice*. Luke, being Luke, makes it physical, telling us not just to rejoice but to "leap for joy."

Which reminds me of a song.

A couple of weeks ago, I was hanging around listening to the band prelude before our mission lovefeast. Right after they played “Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice,” sister Nola Knouse, who was conducting, quoted some words in the third verse: “For when these blest days are over.” She pointed out that although the text looks forward to joy, it also refers to “these blest days.” *These blest days.* We do look forward to a someday; but God also blesses the days we live right here on earth, in this reality, now. So let’s live them as disciples, finding our footing here with Jesus and everyone else on this level plain.

Amen.