

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator and our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. Now I am going to bring us back, for a moment, to the high school days. Perhaps, a literature course where you may have had some required readings. If you were like me, you may have skipped some of those readings but one that I still remember is "As I Lay Dying," by William Faulkner.

The story follows the lives of the people in Addie Bundren's life after her death. Faulkner is considered to be one of the great American novelists and this book is regarded as one of his best. Part of the reason this book is so astonishing is that it is written from the point of view of fifteen different characters.

Often, the characters are observing or experiencing the same event but the story is shaped by the way each character perceives it. This creates new and interesting themes throughout the novel and helps create a clearer picture than if only one character was relaying all the information.

Now there's no test at the end of this sermon for how well you can remember Faulkner's book but this modern example of writing can help us think about the ancient writing we heard today in our Gospel.

Our Gospel lesson is the well-known “beatitudes.” This sermon of blessings that Jesus delivers is recounted in both the Gospel of Matthew and the one we heard today in Luke. Scholars debate whether the two sermons are the same sermon that is passed down and recorded in different ways or if it is actually two separate events.

Either way, the structure of the sermon is very similar but with some key differences that helps us see Jesus in a more expansive way. In Luke, Jesus is speaking from “a level place” or a plain. He is amongst the many who have come to hear him and be cured by him. He is with the common folk as he delivers his sermon of blessings.

The next difference is another fascinating one, only in Luke does Jesus address the people directly. Blessed are YOU who are poor, blessed are YOU who are hungry.” Again, Jesus is not speaking in the third person about things to come or a hypothetical. He is speaking directly to the people and those words continue to speak to us today.

Jesus is also preaching about the physical truth and experience of the people. In Matthew, he speaks about the spiritual lives and faith of the people but in Luke, he speaks directly to how their lives are in this day. The hungry are those who need food for nourishment, those that are weeping will one day wipe their tears and be filled with laughter.

Finally, Jesus includes in this sermon not 8 blessings but 4. Replacing those 4, he includes 4 woes, that contrast the blessings and warn those who have the experience of the “good life.” This warning is for those who see themselves outside of the communal needs, those who can separate themselves from their neighbor and live only on their own terms.

Matthew and Luke recount a very similar sermon but with these key distinctions, we start to get to the heart of the different facets of Jesus’ ministry. The community of Luke is primarily concerned with Jesus’ relationship to those who are on the margins. This is likely because this community, where the author writes down the Gospel from the oral traditions in the area, are those who are literally on the margins.

Yes, in the urban areas, the elite of society would live in the large houses in the middle of the city. The community came from those who lived outside the center of the city, some closer to the center with preferred jobs, “the middle class,” and then those with the undesirable or criminal work lived on the fringe of the city. The community of Luke was ethnically and socioeconomically diverse, coming together as Christian family and share in meals.

They also supported one another, in a time where there was no bank loans or credit cards, the community would have to appeal to the elite for money to further their education or professional skills. This often meant bending to the culture or religion of the elite, something these Christians felt was important not to do.

With this knowledge, no wonder the ministry of Jesus that sticks out to them is when Jesus was calling for justice and would “rub elbows” with anyone who came to see him. Jesus is God who comes down not only to remind us of heavenly rewards, although we know the importance of this as well, but to be with those on the margins and give them hope for a future free from tyranny, oppression, and exploitation. That peace would rule in the world.

We are lucky today, to learn from the many Gospels that recount Jesus’ teachings and highlight different areas of his ministry that are all important. The beatitudes in Luke teach us that Jesus calls us to be in community with one another. That we are fed together, we laugh together, and we draw strength from one another.

We are here, together once again in this place, gathered to share to worship and in a communal meal just like those in the community of Luke. We come from many different backgrounds and have different stories but we are one in this place. I didn’t forget about all of you joining with us online either. Yes, this community is one that is diverse even in the ways we can participate with one another in love and service.

These blessings that Jesus offer orient us and our mission in the community. We know there are so many challenges in this world today whether, we see escalating tension in the Ukraine, growing economic inequality in our own country, or the mental health crisis that so many people go through without quality care.

We are God's hands and feet in the world today. This community can and does allow God to move through it and guide us to good works. We train our minds for an eye towards liberation and inclusion; inclusion of all people because we believe that God creates good. That God loves each one of us and grows the love between us as neighbors and siblings in Christ.

These blessings are not a static statement but a call for how communities can orient themselves and seek to do God's work in the world. "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, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."

This community of faith needs you. It needs each of you as we continue to live into this faith we have. When others cry, we can be there to console and cry alongside. Where there is hunger, we can bring food or fast together. This building is here for us to meet and to worship but Wicker Park Lutheran Church is each one of you who God has brought in and woven together into a beautiful tapestry, each thread, each person important.

Let us leap for joy knowing that we are gathered in together, into one faith, one family in Christ and that no matter the challenges we face ahead, we will go together.

Let us pray. Dear Jesus, we thank you for your expansive ministry that teaches us so much. We give thanks for your passion towards justice and a focus on the people who lived on the margins. You bring hope in places that seek to stifle it. Continue to gather us into one family, continue to watch over us, and continue to guide us wherever your ministry leads. Amen.