

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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One aspect of the gospels that brings me particular delight is how accounts kind of differ between the gospel writers. And there's a lot of reasons for that but usually it's because they were all written for different audiences during different time periods and so the focus shifts depending on the specific social and political context. And sometimes the variation is barely even noticeable, but then for some other it's like ooh yeah that story does hit a little differently when you put it that way instead.

And, to me at least, today's gospel reading falls squarely in the latter category. Now if you're like me, you might have been standing there just now going "ah yes "the beatitudes," or "the sermon on the mount"! But it turns out...those are actually in the Gospel of Matthew. Whereas part of Luke is called The Sermon on the Plain. See in this part of the story in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is trying really hard to like take a nap and rest, but crowds of people are following him everywhere begging him to heal them—which he does! But the man is tired and trying to be heard over the din, so he climbs up the side of a mountain to get some more personal space and takes the disciples with him and there on the side of the mountain, Jesus preaches to them—there aren't even 12 of them yet, it is an intimate moment—presumably some of the crowd who was closest to the mountain could hear too, but they weren't necessarily the intended audience.

These are “The Beatitudes,” there are 8 of them. And in those, Jesus says things like “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And don’t get me wrong, those are great messages! But to me at least, they feel a bit more...ethereal, or detached than what Luke gives us today.

See because in *Luke’s* account Jesus has been going around doing scandalous things like healing people on the sabbath and in the process he attracts a great number of disciples who begin following him around, and from that group, he hand selects the 12 apostles right before this reading starts. And Luke says that he took the 12, along with “a great crowd of his disciples” *and* a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre and Sidon and he brings them to the middle of this great big open plain. And he’s healing people of diseases and driving out unclean spirits and everyone is trying to touch him and be healed. And he looks at his *crowd* and begins preaching today’s message. And while in Matthew he says “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In Luke he says “blessed are *you* who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Matthew’s got him way up a mountain giving a kind of abstract sort of advice to his disciples so they can be some sort of intermediary who will go down the mountain to help spread these words among the crowd below. (And, yes Matthew does want you to think of Moses when you hear that). For Matthew it is the poor *in spirit* who are blessed, but Luke says blessed are you who are poor. Period.

In Luke Jesus picked out his 12, and then immediately stand in a *level* place right in the center of the people. It is a plain in an arid region so think low brownish grasses,

rocks and the occasional wild shrub. There's not a lot of rainfall in this part of the world, so dirt is probably being picked up by the wind. And he gave a message to the people directly, and yes many of them were his disciples, but an even greater number were just people who wanted to see what all the ruckus was about. And Jesus doesn't ask them for credentials, he just goes here is my message, for you.

Sometimes in English we say "you" in a generic sense. "Brushing your teeth is healthy!" but we don't *really* mean you specifically, more like..."brushing *one's* teeth is healthy!" And I want to stress here that that is *not* the way Jesus is using that word. The Greek is clear that Jesus is using that word in a *direct* sense and a plural sense. "Blessed are y'all who are hungry *now* for y'all will be filled." Matthew has Jesus up on a mountain talking about the hypotheticals, but Luke's got the savior of the world down here amongst us with dirt flying in his mouth as he speaks directly to those of us who are suffering in the here and *now*. A message that is *grounded* in every sense of the word.

Jesus looks at the crowd and says you who are hungry and hurting and poor and grieving and shunned and who have been told you're less than, who are yearning for a better tomorrow, who have likely been told in the past that what you're going through right now is some sort of punishment from God. You are blessed. The world we are in is broken and full of hurting, but I have come to create a new thing. Jesus is in no way promising that this blessedness means nothing bad will ever happen—far from it!—but rather that you aren't going to be left alone and forgotten in these broken places. He's going to turn the whole social order upside down and the

hungry will be filled and the poor will gain the kingdom, the grieving will find cause to laugh once more.

And then he moves on to the Woes, and I want to be clear, the word that's being translated here as "woe" isn't a curse or some kind of smiting, no one is getting damned. Jesus is seeking to redirect people and it isn't an approving word, but it's more like "ooph, you who are rich, you have received your consolation" "you who are full now, yikes for you will be hungry." "jeez you who are laughing now, you will mourn and weep" "when all speak well of you, uh-oh for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets." Remember he is speaking to the Judeans living under the Roman occupation. *In order* for these descendants of Jacob to be full and rich and laughing and spoken well of, they had to have betrayed those same people that Jesus called blessed in some way. It probably wasn't through some overt Judas type of moment; it was much more likely to be the more subtle and insidious kind of betrayal. Their neighbor going hungry isn't any of *their* business. They worked really hard for their money, why shouldn't they get to enjoy themselves! Besides they have a reputation to uphold! And Jesus says hey, if any of those statements describe you, (specifically) then (jeeppers) you should really reexamine your life choices, because I'm flipping the whole world upside down and when that day comes...it's not going to be fun for you.

The woes Jesus gives are warnings yes, but they're the kind of warnings that you can come back from. Because Jesus is creating this new thing this new way of being community together, this communion of saints and...you can still be part of it, even

if you've messed up before, even if you're messing up right now. Jesus stands in the midst of a big open plain and extends this invitation to you, just as you are, broken and flawed and beautiful and yearning and trying your best and failing and exhausted and all the other ways of being you. He offers you a place, amongst all of the other Saints who have come before us and all those who will come after us. Not a single one of us is perfect, so you'll fit right in. We live in the broken places now, but we turn our eyes to the Advent season and promise of the coming of the Kind-dom, when we will leap for joy. And not just us who are still here in the flesh, but also the great cloud of witnesses who came before. Who helped to form our own faith and lit the way so that we could follow after them long after they've passed away. Gone from this world but not forgotten. Today we light candles to commemorate them.

Every year on Easter we light the great big pascal candle over there with fire that's traveled here from the Holy Land. And we use that fire to light the sanctuary lamp, which we keep burning perpetually as a symbol of Christ's presence in this place. But...candles don't last forever, so every week the sacristan transfers the fire to a new candle. And so even though the candles themselves change, the same fire continues throughout the year, handed down from one candle to the next in an unbroken chain that leads us back to the good news of the empty tomb. But all those candles that came before this one...never actually get used up all the way. They can still be counted on to hold that Holy Spirit fire. These are the candles we will light to commemorate the saints who have departed this world. Though their

individual lives may have been brief, they were still essential. And without them, we might not be burning quite so bright today.

The departed saints join with us in Holy Communion every week but, today we get to see a physical representation of their presence while we commune. All of the saints, the living and the dead joined together as one with Jesus standing in the middle of the plain shouting “blessed are you. This is my body, given for you. Amen.