

SERMON

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This passage is dangerous. I suppose that's not news as they're all dangerous – on some level. We can't come into this place, hear the Word of God, and pretend we're not at risk. If we hear the Word of God, if we allow it to *speak* to us and to our lives, then we put ourselves in danger. The question is whether we're willing to risk what it means to hear. Are we willing to let our lives can be changed by these words – to be transformed by them so that we can continue to face danger, to proclaim God's Kingdom in the midst of the challenges of this world, of this life?

I don't know if that's what you heard in Jesus' sermon on the plain. The words were likely very familiar, maybe slightly less familiar than Matthew's version of this sermon of Jesus. There are fewer blessings here in Luke's version – and they're partnered with the proclamation of woe. They are perhaps a bit more focused, but no less dangerous because they might seem less comprehensive. Both accounts counter the prevailing sentiment of the world, of the empire. And any time you stand up to the empire, you put yourself at risk.

One of the dangers in hearing these words today is not to take the word "blessed" seriously. It's one of those churchy words that can end up feeling meaningless in the face of the world's trials. It becomes all too easy to talk about God's blessings in a nebulous, intangible way. It can be too easy to make these words into a pretty piece of art that we hang on the wall and forget when we walk out the door.

Not to say that you shouldn't put these words anywhere you can – cross-stitch them, paint them, write them, put them on a plaque, on a cross, on a decorative plate. But then when you've done that, you have to **read** them. You have to figure out what happens next when you live these words.

To those who heard them first, to the disciples who stood on the level place, they were words of revolution. The details of the telling matter, In Matthew, Jesus offers these words from the mountain – symbolic of the giving of the law on Sinai. But in Luke, this teaching happens on the plain, on a level place – and that fits Luke's version of the story. Remember, this is the Gospel that began with the Magnificat, where Mary sang about the lifting up of the lowly, the tearing down of the high and mighty. This is the Gospel where Jesus claimed the fulfillment of scripture – specifically the good news to the poor, the relief to the captives. Luke frames salvation in terms of leveling the world through justice and mercy.

These are words of revolution. In Hebrew thinking, worldly comfort and family stability was a sign of God's blessing. In the Roman Empire, the Emperor – who was seen

as divine – decided who was blessed and it was based on a complicated system of honor. You achieved honor in the eyes of the empire through strategic business deals and social negotiation. It's an oversimplification to say that money bought honor in the Roman Empire, but not by much. Money opened doors to power and honor.

And Jesus was upsetting all of that. The “woes” he speaks to the disciples directly challenge the world order. The poor had no standing. The poor didn't have honor and had very limited ways to “purchase” honor from those who had. The poor were *not* in God's favor. **Except they were.** The Kingdom of God belongs to them. It's right there in what Jesus says. “Yours is the dominion of God” he told them. A present reality. The poor aren't supposed to wait for some far-off nebulous kingdom promise. The poor are the kingdom. God's dominion, God's love, God's favor are right there in the people discarded by the world.

How might that go over in 21st century culture and economy? Therein lies more of that danger. That's when we want to paint a pretty picture, hang it on the wall, and go about our business – emphasis on business.

Now, right about this point is when everyone puts the wall up – myself included – where we want to put a little distance between us and the reality of God's Kingdom as Jesus describes it. We do it in many ways. We're not actually rich, Jesus wasn't talking about those who were tangibly poor – it was more about those who didn't focus on this world but focused on being connected to God more than being connected to money or worldly possessions. We're very willing to step right up to the line that says we **believe** in the beatitudes, but we don't have to do anything to make them a present reality.

And that's the danger. When we stop at that line, when we keep the words of revolution at a safe distance, we aren't actually transformed by the living Word of God. We don't see the Kingdom of God in the world around us because it's just a little bit too scary to push against all the world has taught us. It's safer to spiritualize the beatitudes and go on our way of faithful, but safe, discipleship.

Because the world is a scary place. The world is a dangerous place, where the powerful don't want to be centered in God's Word, where the powerful don't give up power voluntarily because they are asked nicely. The powerful will keep making transactions that are safe for them – that hold their honor close, and discard those who are deemed less worthy.

That's where the beatitudes speak. That's where God's kingdom is found – when we accept that we're all on a level place standing before the cross, standing before God.

When we take that seriously, when we stop trying to make the Word of God another commodity to be traded in the world's marketplace, we see the Kingdom of God in all its beauty – a Kingdom that doesn't stand on how honorable someone might be; a kingdom in which the one who dies with the most toys doesn't win; a kingdom where the influence you've bought with the currency of the day – whether that's flattery, political pressure, or straight-up dollars – whatever wealth you have can't buy blessings.

That's the kingdom Jesus brought into the world. That's the kingdom we proclaim. That's the kingdom in which we live. Amen.