SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“On the Level”* Luke 6:17-26

This morning’s reading is known to most of us as the *Beatitudes,* and I suspect that when you heard them proclaimed (as we just did), you recognized them right away. However, I also suspect that there are some of us who have stopped and are scratching our heads and are thinking: “something is *off*.” Right now, a few of us are thinking: “I thought Jesus said more than that. I thought there were more ‘blesseds’” or “I thought Jesus said something about peacemakers and the meek.”

We are, of course, right, because the *Beatitudes* do not appear only here in Luke, Matthew also remembered and recorded them in his Gospel. So, we have two Gospel writers remembering the same thing, but also remembering them quite differently than one another—which is actually not surprising. What *is* surprising are the differences themselves—they are really very interesting because each Gospel writer addresses two different aspects of human need and understanding.

(If you want to look them up,) Matthew’s *Beatitudes* are in the beginning of chapter five of his gospel. His tend to talk about human beings and the human condition within the context of our spiritual needs and our spiritual life.

When we embrace God and live lives within God’s holy laws and holy ways, says Matthew’s Jesus, then the trials and depravations of this life are like a promise of an after-life where we will be fulfilled. So, Matthew’s *Beatitudes* hold out to us tremendous hope, and give people who are suffering in this life context wherein their suffering has promise and meaning.

However, there is a danger in this interpretation of which we need to be mindful. You see, while Matthew’s *Beatitudes* can be very helpful, and a hopeful way of receiving Jesus’ love and the power of his love*,* at the same timean *exclusively spiritual* reading and understanding of the *Beatitudes* can also serve as a way of supporting a *status quo* of injustice in *this* life.

*Great will be your reward in heaven*—in other words: do not worry to try to change the miserable conditions you live in now because this is the very thing that will cause you to be exalted in heaven. Suffering in this life becomes like a ticket to the best of everything when we get to heaven. All we have to do is be patient and accepting of our misfortune until we *die*, then all will be made-up to us.

Let me be clear about this: many of us suffer every day. We also suffer in a multitude of ways—some of it is physical, some of it is emotional, or spiritual. Our bodies are not perfect—they grow old, slow down, or become less vibrant. So, there are all sorts of ways in which the patience and trust Matthew’s *Beatitudes* advocate are appropriate and commendable.

However, there are times when something different is needed. There are times when we need to address the *causes* of ours’ and others’ suffering in this life by meeting them and putting an end to them. We need to work to put an end to hunger, to ignorance, to the wanton destruction of the earth. We need to re-commit ourselves to the war on poverty, not on poor people.

Perhaps this is why Matthew and Luke even differ in the setting they record—the place in which they remember Jesus preaching the *Beatitudes.* In Matthew, the *Beatitudes* are part of the *Sermon on the Mount.* As you may have noticed, Luke’s *Beatitudes* are part of the *Sermon on the Plain.* One has Jesus preaching from “on high,” the other has Jesus coming down to a level place where he can look people in the eye and speak to them of their blessedness.

As we read through the Gospel of Luke, we see that this is very much in keeping with his experience and relationship with God. Throughout his Gospel, Luke’s Jesus is especially attentive to those on the margins of society: the sick, women, the outcast, children.  All of these people are usually invisible in their culture because they have no power. The sick and the poor are also often shunned because their misfortune was seen as God’s judgement on them for some kind misdeed. No one wanted to be associated with someone who was covered in such shame.

In the reading we heard this morning, and throughout Luke, the sick, the poor, women, and others like them find themselves trying to be touched by him. And the reason they come forward to do this is because Jesus is telling them—especially in this passage, but also throughout all the stories about him—that God’s love can and does lift away whatever shame we are carrying, and God offers God’s help to begin again, and do better.

Jesus is telling them—and *us*—that no one need remain to be considered an outcast. Indeed, all are children of God and deserve to be treated with respect. All are made by God, and so all are loved and seen—all are recognized as God’s children, God’s beloved.

Here in the Gospel of Luke, these outcasts, these very people who suffer and are not accorded honor in their culture—these are also the ones who end up hearing this *Sermon on the Plain* of blessings and woes, spoken to them face-to-face.

The implications of Luke’s memory and recording of the *Beatitudes* should also settle deeply into our hearts and minds as we—Nu’uanu Congregational Church—continue working on and fulfilling our desire to be in ministry with God, as we continue to discover what it means to be a missional church.

In addition to being called to be aware of the ways in which portions—sometimes whole categories—of God’s beloved people are being marginalized, we are called to serve them. However, there is more: we are also called to be mindful of the way in which we attempt to serve.

Rather than serving “on high”—which should be reserved only for Christ—we should also ask ourselves, and be aware of, whether or not we are meeting the people we hope to serve in a place of equality.

This may seem like an odd thing to say, but it is not uncommon for those of us who serve to do so from a position of privilege which we are sometimes not even aware of.

For example, the seminary I attended in Berkeley was situated on the top of a hill with about six other seminaries of varying denominations. Thus, it was called, Holy Hill. The streets down below Holy Sill were filled with homeless people. A lot of them begged for spare change.

One day, as I was sitting and talking with a group of fellow students about this situation, we realized that those of us who gave out our spare change, and those who did not, actually treated the people asking in the same way.

None of us would look them in the eye. Whether we gave them our coins or passed them by, we avoided eye contact. You see, seeing one another is always the necessary first step to creating a relationship with another human being. Apparently, neither group wanted to risk even a fleeting *semblance* of relationship.

What Luke saw Jesus do—what made the biggest impression on him was the way in which Jesus was careful to meet the people he had come to serve from a true position of equality. He made himself completely available. He stood before them and looked them in the eye as he ministered to them. In this way, they knew—*we* know that what is being offered is more than charity, it is something that is going to change our lives.

*That* is what it means to be a missional church. We have been called to *see* people with our whole heart and spirit. We have been called to *be* seen, too. We are people who will meet others in a place of fellowship and equality.

What is more, when we find ourselves on *un*equal footing with others, we are called to find a way to that level place where we can meet them and be together. We are called get there any non-violent way we can. We are even called to sacrifice for it.

And our good news is that we know from very personal experience what this can mean in the lives of others because we, too, have been touched by the love of Christ who did not withdraw, but continued on to calvary and a cross so that we might be truly blessed.

Getting back to that group of seminarians I told you about a little bit ago: we agreed that day to take a risk. Whether we said no, or gave them something, we promised to at least look people in the eye when they asked us for our spare change. We decided to at least risk *seeing* them and be *seen* by them.

What difference did that make?

For me, it changed something in my heart and spirit that I appreciate and remember even all these years later. What is more, as I remember and share that story, and I have shared it quite a few times in the intervening 25 years, each time I share it I know this story is continuing to change me, still working on me. It continues to make me wanting to change more—to change more in my heart and spirit, but also in the world around me, and so I am called to a new kind of self-awareness that cherishes the story of Christ who saw—who *sees* me and asks all of us to make our way to a level place so that we can see each other.

Friends, will we take the chance of being on the level with God’s beloved? That is the question. I hope so. It is what I pray for myself, and for all of us. And because of that I will close this sermon with an announcement: in the materials that accompany the announcement for this video there is information on how each of us can meet with some of God’s people on that level place and join with them in advocating for clean water out at Red Hill.

I hope all will review the material and see your place in renewing the earth and obtaining justice for all those many people affected by the water situation on Red Hill. Whether it is this or any other action, I look forward to gathering with you and many, many others on that level place where we can share God’s goodness and love. May this be so. Amen.