

The Gift of Fulfillment
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Luke 6:17-26

Today is youth Sunday and we have decided to continue along with our sermon series the gifts of faith. So far we have explored the gift of community, the gift of scripture, the gift of call and today we will be exploring the gift of fulfillment by looking at the passage in Luke known as “The Sermon on the Plain”

You may know that many of our gospels share some of the same stories, but with different nuances. This was especially apparent during Advent when we read solely in the book of Luke. It wasn't until we read the Christmas story in Matthew that we were able to learn about the wisemen the Sunday we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany.

Today we are back in the book of Luke, and our passage this morning is widely known as the “Sermon on the Plain or the Level Place”. Now, you may be more familiar with the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives with the Beatitudes. In the Book of Luke, the physical location Jesus gives the sermon is different—instead of looking down to the crowd, he stands on their level and instead of the Beatitudes, we are given the “Blessings and Woes”

Jesus's Beatitudes in Matthew are more spiritual in nature...he says *blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. Yet in Luke, while very similar, the small changes make a big difference. Jesus addresses the more physical nature- *Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry*. And then we are given this extra addendum to the blessings. The Sermon on the Plain includes these woes. So Jesus's focus on the physical nature of one's plight followed by woes about those plights leave us a little...uncomfortable hearing this sermon. The woes alone can have a negative connotation. Sort of like a “you just wait”. But when translated from the original language, these “woes” are meant not to be a condemnation or a curse but more predictive of what is to come—a word of precaution. By preaching the blessings and the woes Jesus brings about the leveling nature of the compassionate justice of God—that there will be joys and sorrows, that the poor will no longer be poor and the rich no longer rich. God will make all things level. Jesus has this balancing act between Blessings and the Woes that point us to the fact that having faith doesn't correlate to a happy life full of joy and success. There will be hard times and there will be challenging times.

When our youth were planning the content for worship this Sunday, we studied the gospel text in the lectionary Luke 6:16-27 that Matthew just read for you. Two weeks ago when we explored the gift of scripture, we talked about how scripture can be a word of both comfort and provoking. That our call is to value the entire gift of scripture—the passages that bring us great joy and comfort, and the passages that challenge us. Dwelling in the text in all seasons can be a gift to us. And doing so can reveal things about our God and our faith.

The irony here is that this week's gospel reading is one of those provoking texts. I squirmed a little in my chair when I read it. Perhaps you did too. This text can make us squirm a bit

because of the direct tone of Jesus—there is no misunderstanding here. Jesus is very clear. Jesus is urging the crowd not to focus on the material things in life, the things that the world tells us leads to fulfillment: wealth, success, self-aggrandizement, approval of others. These things are not related to the work of God. Simply because you have faith does not mean that suddenly you are gifted these things. A life of faith includes the ups, the downs, and the in between.

So a question we the youth of St. John's have for us today as we worship to reflect: Where in your life are you seeking fulfillment? Where are you hungry for the reassurance of God's blessings?

It is so common, and I am guilty of it, is to think about gratitude in the form of blessings. We have the blessing of a healthy family, we have the blessing of financial means, we have the blessing of a good job, a nice home, a comfortable way of living. It is almost like we see our blessings as things that we have that lead us to fulfillment. And when we don't have these things, we somehow feel unfulfilled, we feel like something is missing if our lives don't look quite like other people's. When we consider those blessings and then read this text, we can easily get very uncomfortable. What is Jesus saying to us?

Our culture, especially on social media, is notorious for focusing on success and good luck as "blessings" as if you *not* having those things means you are somehow not blessed by God. Week after week hundreds of Christians pack into large mega churches characterized as Prosperity Gospel churches. Where the good news, the word of God preached is that if you have faith, if you do all the things God asks you to do, then you will be lavishly blessed with all that you could ever want—wealth, material possessions, children, big families, the best of the best. There are the haves, and the have nots. And if you have not, well you just need to try to be a better Christian, have faith. Jesus challenges this mindset in the Blessings and the Woes.

When we studied this passage at youth group our youth were struck not by the blessings and woes, but by the first part of this passage that can often get overlooked. Even before he preaches, there is a mass healing. Jesus has just been up on the mountaintop choosing his disciples and he comes down, we see that there are people seeking out Jesus trying to get to him, hungry for healing. They sought out this Jesus, they had confidence that this Christ would heal them, give them what they needed...that they would be fulfilled. I find it so interesting because there isn't an individuality to this healing, it is very corporate in nature. All who came and reached out to God were welcomed, were blessed, were healed, fulfilled.

In advent we waited with anticipation for the Christ child on Christmas, but also for the coming of Christ again. And in doing so we read texts about the justice of God—where all things would be made level. The mountains would be lowered and the valleys would be raised. Here in this passage is a manifestation for that—healing was available for all. So grew Christ's ever widening circle of grace for all. There were no questions asked, no actions that the healing hinged upon. Christ provided fulfillment for all.

The audience, the listeners of the sermon on the plain, were those from the region of Tyre. Scholars believe that the crowd was a crew of people considered poor in those days. And yet here Jesus brings them healing.

One of the big questions our Youth were asking and what we have for you all to ponder today is where in your life are you seeking fulfillment? Where are you hungry for God to enter into your life? So often we hunger for more things—more control, more stability, more predictability. These are the things we hunger for because they bring us security. But what we find in Christ is that the true gift of fulfillment is the security that we have in a God who is a just God. That welcomes all to the table, that heals all. A God who has an ever widening circle of grace. And that may not make us any more comfortable than those woes did earlier. But it certainly will help us evaluate what it means to be blessed by God.

Fulfillment is not based on whether we are well liked, whether people approve of us. Fulfillment from God does not depend on how successful we are in our jobs relationships, in all things. Fulfillment from God is not hinged upon anything we can do. Thanks be to God for that.

Today we will break bread at this table celebrating that our fulfillment, what makes us blessed is being known and loved by a God who endures with us through good times and bad. That wherever we are in our faith journeys, our God will welcome and feed us here. Our God will nourish our hungry souls. Our God will give us the gift of fulfillment.