

HELP!

Luke 6.12-26

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Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

“Blessed are they who through their lifetime sow the seeds of peace.”
May it be so,

You probably recognized that the choir was singing another version of those famous blessings we call “the beatitudes.”

The original version is in Matthew: “Blessed are the poor in Spirit; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the peacemakers; etc.” And they are part of what we call “the Sermon on the Mount” because Matthew is trying to make a connection between Jesus and Moses. So, just like Moses went up to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, Jesus goes up the mountain to teach this blessing way.

Luke, on the other hand, gives us the *Readers Digest* version. Matthew has 8 or 9 blessings, depending on how you count them. Luke has 4. And he throws in some warnings for good measure. “Woe to you.”

Also, Luke seems to be telling the egalitarian version of the life of Jesus so instead of Jesus going up the mountain, he is coming down the mountain to meet people on “a level place;” as if to say that we are all in this together.

So, here is Luke’s version in Luke 6.

Luke 6.12-26 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

First, a little prologue: As Jesus continues his healing work, he heals a man with a withered hand, on the sabbath, in a synagogue. And the story says “At this, they (the religious establishment) were furious and began to discuss with one another what they could do to Jesus.” The story continues in vs. 12 ...]

It was about this time that Jesus went out to the mountains to pray, spending the night in communion with God. At daybreak, he summoned the disciples and picked out twelve of them, whom he named as apostles: Simon – to whom he gave the name Peter – and his brother Andrew; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James, and Simon, who was called the Zealot; Judas ben-James, who became a traitor.

Coming down the mountain with them, Jesus stopped in a level area where there were a great number of disciples. A large crowd of people was with them from Jerusalem and all over Judea, to as far north as the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon – people who had come to hear Jesus and be healed of their diseases, and even to be freed from unclean spirits. Indeed, the whole crowd was trying to touch Jesus because power was coming out of him and healing them all.

Looking at the disciples, Jesus said:

“You who are poor are blessed,
for the reign of God is yours.

You who hunger now are blessed,
for you’ll be filled.

You who weep now are blessed,
for you’ll laugh.

You are blessed when people hate you,
when they scorn and insult you
and spurn your name as evil
because of the Chosen One.

On the day they do so,
rejoice and be glad:

your reward will be great in heaven,
for their ancestors treated the prophets the same way.

But woe to you rich,
for you are now receiving your comfort in full.

Woe to you who are full,
for you’ll go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,

for you'll weep in your grief.
Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for their ancestors treated the false prophets
in the same way.”

You may remember a couple weeks ago that Dr. Hunter was preaching about that earlier part of the story in Luke 4 where Jesus goes to his hometown and he preaches on Isaiah 61: “The Spirit is upon me to preach good news to the poor,” and the people of his hometown were so impressed and Luke 4 says: “they all spoke well of him.”

Just two chapters later, Jesus says “Woe to you when all speak well of you.” Because the rest of the story in Luke 4 is that he started explaining what he meant about good news to the poor – like the prophet who was sent to feed a starving widow and her son living in enemy territory and the prophet who was sent to heal a commander in the Syrian army.

“We think it’s great that Jesus is preaching good news to the poor,” his hometown crowd might have thought, “as long as he is only talking about us.” They changed their tune when it became clear that he meant those other people. And they were so angry with him they tried to throw him off a cliff. Jesus never returned to his hometown again.

“Blessed are you when people hate you and call you all kinds of names” and “woe to you when people speak well of you.”

There are all kinds of versions of the beatitudes.

The choir has one.

Matthew has one.

Luke has one.

Our beloved Rod Romney has one in his book about wilderness spirituality. “Blessed are those who remember who they are, for they shall come home to the truth of their own being,” he says.

In this Black History Month, I have been paying attention especially to what African-Americans have to say about the things we are considering. And, as it turns out, Alice Walker – author of *The Color Purple* and one of the mothers of the “womanist” movement – Alice Walker has her own version.

In her version, rather than “blessed are those,” she says, “helped are those.” And she has not 4, not 8, but 27 of them.

And I have to say that Alice Walker is touching something important with “help” because my relationship with help is very complicated.

In fact, I think one of the quickest ways to identify my own privilege is to look at how I relate to help.

Privilege is thinking I have the right to determine who is worthy of help.

Privilege is always seeing myself as “the helper.”

Privilege is holding so tightly to my comfort and security that I have convinced myself I don’t need any help.

And, at the same time, privilege is talking about people who are “the help” as if their only value is to wait on my needs.

Although, I have to say that one of my favorite movies is *The Help* with Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer.

For Alice Walker to identify her beatitudes as “helped are those” is to face us with our complicated relationship we have with help.

So this week I have been reading Luke 6 with this overlay of Alice Walker’s version of the beatitudes.

For instance, when I read about Jesus' healing ministry, I hear Alice Walker say: "Helped are those who love the broken and the whole; none of their children, nor any of their ancestors, nor any of themselves shall be despised."

If we can learn to love our brokenness and our healing, what part of us is there to despise? If we can learn to love both brokenness and healing, who is there to despise?

What does it say about the religious leaders of Jesus' day that they despised Jesus for healing someone? What does it say about our country that there are those who despise any promise of healthcare for all?

"Helped are those," Alice Walker says, "who love the broken and the whole," who have no reason to despise themselves or others.

And then there is the impending attack on Jesus and the fact that, among his own, there is a traitor. Why would Jesus keep putting himself at risk?

Alice Walker says: "Helped are those who risk themselves for others' sakes; to them will be given increasing opportunities for ever greater risks. Theirs will be a vision of the world in which no one's gift is despised or lost."

Last Sunday, Pastor Anita talked about Jesus telling Peter that he needed to row out into deeper water. Following Jesus, she said, is always calling us to take the risk of going deeper.

As we are remembering Executive Order 9066 that sent our Japanese neighbors into Internment camps 77 years ago, I have been thinking about Pastor Harold Jensen who was the pastor here at the time. I wonder what it took for him to stand in this pulpit and to call out our government for its actions – and to do so just after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. You can probably imagine how popular that was. I wonder

how many people got angry and walked out? How many members left the church? Why risk everything?

And that wasn't all. When the war was over and our neighbors of Japanese descent started returning from the camps, the editor of the *Seattle Star* wrote that "we must form posses to turn them back at the city limits." Pastor Jensen said that the only thing we should do is to meet them on their way and say "welcome home!"

When we talk about how important "home" is to us here as a spiritual value, it's not just about being warm and comfortable with other people just like us. It's taking the risk to welcome those who have been rejected and imagining with them a world where no one's gift is despised or lost.

"Helped are those who risk themselves for others' sakes."

When the story in Luke says that Jesus "went out to the mountains to pray, spending the night in communion with God," I hear Alice Walker say: "Helped are those who live in quietness, knowing neither brand name nor fad; for they shall live every day as if in eternity, and each moment shall be full as it is long."

Helped are those who take some time away from the consumer-driven noise of the world to be quiet, to commune with that which is greater than themselves, and to remember what really matters.

What do you think Jesus prayed out there on the mountain? Given all the power that was going out of him and all the needs that still surrounded him, do you think Jesus prayed "Help! Help Me!"

We know another prayer that Jesus prayed. When he was dying on the cross he cried out with the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me; why are so far from helping me?"

I was thinking about that line from the great old hymn – one of our Heritage Hymns – “help of the helpless, O abide with me.”

If I could paraphrase Alice Walker I would say: “Helped are those who know they need help; who take enough time away from all their noisy illusions of self-sufficiency to notice that they need help; who are not too proud to ask for help; who know, like Anne Lamott that there are 3 great prayers and the first one is “Help!”

“Helped are those who live in quietness,” Alice Walker says.

And then, as Jesus is teaching, he says:

“Blessed are the poor,” and “woe to those who are rich.”

“Blessed are those who hunger,” and “woe to those who are full.”

“Blessed are those who weep,” and “woe to those of you who laugh now” because grief will come and you better have some practice with weeping.

In whatever version – the choir, Matthew, Luke, Rod Romney, Alice Walker – the beatitudes are a turn around. They aim us in a direction away from the easy assumptions we make about life. In their original form, they may be too familiar to be anything but superficial platitudes. But in their revised versions they call us to go deeper; to pay closer attention to the realities of life in poverty and hunger and grief and resistance; to imagine that there could be a different way; that the meaning of life itself is not determined by the inevitable movement toward death.

Alice Walker says: “Helped are those who lose their fear of death; theirs is the power to envision the future in a blade of grass.”

Do you remember the last words Dr. King ever spoke in a public gathering? It was April 3rd, 1968 at Mason Temple church in Memphis. And he said:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

“Helped are those who lose their fear of death; theirs is the power to envision the future in a blade of grass.”

Dr. King had every right to fear death. Not simply because there were so many threats against his life but because he must have known that there would come a day when we would all “speak well of him” – we would all say nice things about him even as we try to ignore the difficult things he stood for. He must have wondered if, after his death, his message would be co-opted and his work would end up having all the life drained out of it.

But that night, he said: “I'm happy tonight. I'm now worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

I don't know what Dr. King must have been thinking that night. What I do know is that he knew how to ask for help. I know that because one of his favorite hymns was: “Precious Lord, take my hand; lead me on, let me stand; I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.”

And today, if you hear that voice – that voice stirring in your own soul saying: “Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me, help me, stand” – today if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Rod Romney, *Wilderness Spirituality* (Element, 1999), pp.53-54. Alice Walker, “The Gospel According to Shug,” www.fantasymaps.com/stuff/shug.html. The story of Harold Jensen in *Our First Baptist Heritage 1869-1984*, p.111. Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow* (Riverhead Books, 2012). Martin Luther King, *I Have A Dream: Writings And Speeches That Changed The World* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986/1992), p.203.