

A couple of teaching points about our gospel reading... New Testament scholars have an interesting theory about this material... Our four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were all written maybe forty to seventy years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. With Mark probably being the first, followed by Matthew or Luke, and John was probably the last.

The gospel of Mark is a little rough. The grammar is not always correct and it is abrupt and short. Many scholars believe Luke and Matthew used Mark kind of as an outline, fixed the grammar and added a lot of material.

Some scholars have talked about a theory called "Q" which stands for Quelle, which is a German word meaning source. These scholars hypothesize that although the story of Jesus wasn't written until much later, it's quite possible that people wrote things down that Jesus might have said.

In other words, a list of quotes. I find this plausible, because people experienced Jesus in very poignant ways... They knew Jesus to be a teacher and healer, and I think it's very possible that people wanted to remember what he was saying.

This "Q" theory goes on to speculate that when the writers of Matthew and Luke were composing, they used this list of quotes. Our reading for today is that material. In Luke this material is called the sermon on the plain, on a level place. In Matthew this material is called, as you might guess, the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew and Luke thought very carefully about the context for this material. In the gospel of Matthew, important things happen on the top of mountains. Consistent with the Old Testament, Moses receives the ten commandments at the

top of a mountain. In other words, Matthew is suggesting that these sayings are as important as the commandments.

Now, in the gospel of Luke Jesus says these same things but on a level place. Which is the theological result of much prophecy where the Mountains will be made low and the valleys shall be filled. In other words, Luke might be suggesting that Jesus teaching is the fulfilling of Old Testament prophecy.

I like both of these suggestions. And I like to think that it's not either / or, but both / and... Both Matthew and Luke get it right! And for different reasons...

If this theory of Q is right, and I think it makes some sense, it means that we have a higher degree of probability that Jesus actually said these things. That people heard these sayings, and were so moved, they just had to write them down.

Another name for this material is the be-attitudes; blessed are you, blessed are you, blessed are you... and Matthew is typically credited with enumerating the be-attitudes. Luke starts with the be-attitudes, blessed are you, blessed are you, and then quickly switches to woes, woe are you, woe are you... In other words, Luke contrasts the be-attitudes with the don't be-attitudes. Luke is intentional about leveling, this is kind of a ying and yang thing.

What I'd like to do this morning, is do some reflecting with the leveling that is in Luke's version of this sermon, the blessings as well as the woe's... What is this leveling? And how do we experience it in our lives?

First of all, the blessings... "Blessed are you who are poor... Blessed are you who are hungry... Blessed are you who weep..." Blessed are the poor, hungry and grieving... I'll be honest, I've been poor, hungry and sad, and believe me I didn't feel particularly blessed.

Then the woes, "Woe to you who are rich... Woe to you who are full... Woe to you who are laughing..." Woe to you who are rich, full and having fun, because you've pretty much had your day in the sun. And again, I'll be honest, this pretty much describes me, and I don't like to hear it... I'd prefer to keep the blessings coming...

What I'm trying to say, is that at different times of our lives, all of us, we've all known both blessings and woes... Haven't we?

One of the things Jesus is challenging in these sayings is the equation that God helps those who help themselves. It's the idea that rich are blessed because God favors them. And the other side of that is that the poor are cursed because God doesn't favor them.

In this equation, the rich are looked up to and the poor have only themselves to blame. This theological view equates blessing with righteousness, and misfortune with sinfulness.

And it's tempting to believe that... Because it makes common sense... It's the logical conclusion of obeying the law or the ten commandments... After all, if you follow the law, generally speaking things will go well for you.

In the theological world during Jesus' time, everybody pretty much got what they deserved. In the gospel of John, the disciples encounter a blind man, and they ask Jesus, who sinned that he was born blind, they wonder if it was it his parents... In other words, if you are blessed, it's because you are righteous. If you are unfortunate, it's because you are a sinner.

In the sermon on the plain, Jesus flips this theological equation upside down. Blessed are the poor, and the reverse of that is Woe to those who are rich. In other words, God's blessing is not related to some human measure of success.

As Lutherans we're law and gospel people, and one of the ramifications of that is that good news has to be good news for everyone, or it's not good news to anyone... The gospel does not favor one group of people at the expense of another. You see, in the kingdom of God, there are no winners and losers, there's only winners and winners.

In that way, the gospel itself, is a leveling agent... And it transforms rich and poor alike, or whatever categories you might imagine, republican or democrat, black or white... It's about building relationship and wholeness...

Quick story... This past week Kris and I went to see the movie "Green Book." It's a true story of Don Shirley, a concert pianist from New York who also happens to be black and his relationship with Tony Vallelonga, an Italian from the Bronx who happens to be Don's chauffer for a music tour across the country. And this is during the early sixties.

At the beginning of the story you see how each man is so different, Don is rich and talented, and refined... Don also has a little bit of a chip on his shoulder, because he's black he hasn't had the same musical opportunities as a white musician. Tony is almost the exact opposite, he's poor, a bit of a slob, and most definitely racist. They have virtually nothing in common with each other. Just a lot of prejudice.

As the story unfolds, initially they don't see eye to eye on anything. But they are in the car together for thousands of miles and a relationship starts to develop. Tony sees how talented Don is. Then the tour goes to the deep south and Tony starts to see how racism operates. And when he sees it, he slowly starts to understand and he changes.

Near the end of the movie, Don is supposed to play piano in a ritzy club where the Jim Crow laws still exist. He enters the dining room with the intention of eating before the concert. But because he's black, the host refuses to seat him. It's alright for black people to serve as wait staff and entertainers, but they are not allowed to eat there.

Tony, who is also a little bit of a hot head, can't understand, and he's ready to punch someone out. Don calmly enters the situation and they leave. Ultimately Don refuses to play. He says that if he can't eat there, he won't perform there... There's a lot of transformation that happens in this story, and on both sides. Both Tony's blindness, as well as Don's blindness is replaced with understanding and authentic relationship.

They were both capable of listening to each other and changing their minds about each other. It's a story of two very different people who find their common

humanity. The distances separating the two of them were overcome. There was a great leveling in their relationship...

The good news today, is that the God we worship, is a God who blesses all of us. The poor along with the rich, the hungry along with the full, those in sorrow as well as those who are happy... The blessing is in the relationship with one another.

You see, letting go of being on the top is hard, it might be experienced as a woe, but when a relationship of mutuality develops, all those things that separate people one from another, like money, or race, or station, begin to fade. And we begin to see what's really important in life.

It's not about money or fortune or having an easy life, it's all about love. At the end of your life, would you prefer to be known as a person with riches in the bank, or a person rich with friends? Jesus teaching is about a great leveling, getting rid all those things that separate us, one from another.

And when we all love each other, it is all of us who are blessed... And all together we are blessed to be a blessing to this community and for the sake of the world.

Amen...