

Blessed are the Persecuted?

February 17, 2019

Luke's version of the Beatitudes or the Sermon on the Plain is a brisk reversal of everyday expectations, isn't it? People then, and now, celebrated the rich and the famous. People then, and now, enjoyed good food and drink. People then, and now, preferred to hang around people who were happy.

Jesus' message here seems to be a decided downer, doesn't it? Blessed are we when we are hated (as Luke puts it); Matthew's version of the same sermon puts it more specifically: blessed are the persecuted. And then in Luke (not in Matthew) there are all those curses: woe to the rich, woe to the full, woe to those who laugh. Seriously—what's wrong with laughing? Jesus seems here to be echoing those Puritans for whom they had the haunting suspicion that someone, somewhere might be having fun. Thanks, but no thanks. I'll pass. Who wouldn't?

So, there's unfortunately a long history of Christian masochism, to use the fancy word that we don't want to repeat in our interpretation of this passage or, even more, in our Christian living. There is no path to holiness through pain. It is not our calling to seek out suffering. That's not what this passage is about. Jesus died, as we just heard our choir sing so beautifully for us, at the hands of empire so that we might live. Period.

So, to understand what Jesus is up to here, and why people continued to flock to him when he preached like this—indeed, because he preached like this—we need to set this passage in context, both literary and historical. So, literally, this is Luke's version of what in Matthew was the Sermon on the Mount as Pastor Bridget just mentioned. Matthew is all about making Jesus the new Moses, so just like Moses brings down the law from the mountain from Mount Sinai, so Jesus offers the new covenant in this sermon from a mountain.

For Luke, though, this is a sermon on a plain: and that detail is important. Luke, as a gospel writer, is all about leveling things out—making mountains low and valleys high, generating greater equality and social justice.

And then in a literary context, it's important to recognize what comes before and what comes after this passage in Luke. What comes before we heard—Jesus is healing people left and right; people are flocking to him from all over for healing. Jesus' power is to heal. He's making them whole. And people were coming to him from all over the place, from Tyre and Sidon on the coast and from Jerusalem in the heart of the country. So that's what comes before the Beatitudes.

And then what comes after, that we'll hear next week, Pastor Jan, that's what we'll hear next week as the famous passage about nonviolence and loving even your enemies. Loving even your enemies, that passage about turning the other cheek. So that's the literary context for this passage.

Historically—I set Jan up—historically, the most crucial contextual fact to remember about Christian Scripture, in my estimation, is that it almost always has empire, and occupation, in the background. Jesus' followers were occupied by a ruthless imperial force, and most of Jesus'

teaching implicitly, if not explicitly, critiques that violence, and that is definitely where Jesus is going in the context of Luke: love your enemies.

So what we have here is Jesus in Luke interpreting and critiquing empire in a very specific way. His teaching is directed to two extremes—to the very poor and to the very rich. To the very poor, Jesus' words are a comfort: you are blessed, favored, graced—and they hear those words of woe and their desire for justice is stoked. And to the very rich, Jesus' words were an offense. That's why they killed him. And there's satire here in Jesus' words, a subtle kind of humor that's found throughout Jesus' teachings once you began to become aware of it.

And so when we listen carefully, we see that Jesus' words in Luke weren't addressed to *any and all people* with wealth. It was a particular kind of rich person that Jesus has in his sights here, and that the prophets critique repeatedly. Here's the list again: rich, full, laughing. Jesus is talking about rich people who had *contempt* for the poor, who *scoffed* at the poor as our Psalmist put it in Psalm 1 that Heather read. I'm sure we could think of some contemporary examples. Jesus is saying woe to those who greedily gobble up resources and eat, and laugh, and play golf, for example, when they have means they might have used to benefit others, when they have power that they might have used to benefit others—and they eat, and drink, and laugh when the cameras are turned off. They scoff at the poor. Those are the rich to whom Jesus says, “Woe unto you.”

The Roman Empire was riddled with inequality, a lot like today. And among the rich there were some who worked very hard to generate wealth for many. We have examples of these rich benefactors and philanthropists throughout Jesus' gospels and stories—farmers, business people stewards, merchants. There were rich people among Jesus' earliest followers. Indeed, the Jesus movement could not have flourished and grown without them. Phoebe is one of my favorite examples, but there are many, many examples we can choose from: men and women who had means and who shared those means with others as they follow Jesus.

In fact, to properly understand this Sermon on the Plain, then, we need to recognize that it's about that plain. Most of Jesus' listeners, like most of us, were people in the middle: more or less rich, more or less poor. Jesus simplifies the actual economic situation to make a theological point. He exaggerates the dichotomy between rich and poor to make it plain: the very poor are blessed by God (because they need hope to work for justice) and the contemptuous rich are cursed by God (because they ignore the common humanity they share with the poor). So, be blessed, and don't live with contempt.

To those of us in the middle, then, Jesus says the same thing to all of us: have hope. Don't hoard. Be comforted. Share with others. Live with so much love that you love even your enemies. Live with so much joy that even if people hate you for my sake (that is, for living a life of love), you still love. Share with one another because that is God's way—God the creator who shares *everything* with us, holding nothing back.

Now, Luke wrote to people who were facing persecution. But the time Luke wrote his gospel, Jesus' followers had been kicked out of the synagogues or they had left of their own accord, and so they no longer had the protection that the empire afforded to licit religions like Judaism. Jesus followers were religiously illicit, and they could face persecution just for that very fact: just for being people who loved. So, blessed are the persecuted.

Over the past week, as I was traveling back and forth to Philadelphia, I was reading a book entitled *Factfulness* by the late Swedish MD and public health advocate and public health professor, Hans Rosling. The actual title of the book is *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – And Why Things are Better Than You Think*.

Rosling spent his life as a doctor and public health advocate in some of the poorest places in the planet: India, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo. He died as he was completing this book which he wrote with his son and daughter-in-law. So, this book is his legacy, and it is simply a startling read for those of us accustomed to getting our news from sources where “if it bleeds, it leads” is the prevailing market approach.

For instance, let me ask you a quick question that will take us briefly, as I wrap up, into Rosling’s research. A little quiz. I am still a professor, so this is multiple choice: three options.

Here’s the question. In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world’s population living in extreme poverty (that is, on less than \$2 a day) has: A. almost doubled, B. remained more or less the same, or C. almost halved.

How many think A. almost doubled? How many think, remained more or less the same. B. How many think C. almost halved. The Cs have it. Over the past 20 years, due in part to the U. N. Millennium Goals, due in part to philanthropists like Bill and Melinda Gates, due in part to micro-lending by individuals like Mohammed Yunus, and due in part to the development of global trading networks, technology, and institutions, and due in part to church-based advocacy and global health initiatives that accompany the poor, the number of people in the world living on less than \$2 a day has fallen from 1.9 billion to 766 million. Wow!

Now, that’s still a lot, and one of the things I like about Rosling’s book is that he encourages us to hold two ideas together in our heads at the same time. In other words, he’s not an optimist. He’s not Pollyannaish. Not at all. He believes we can say: things are terrible when 766 million people around the world still live on less than \$2 a day. We must change that. And we can say—at the same time holding these two ideas together in our brain—766 million is a lot less than 1.9 billion. Right? In 1990, roughly 29 percent of the world population lived in extreme poverty. Twenty-nine percent! Now the number is nine percent. As Rosling puts it, “Today almost everybody has escaped hell.” Or we might say: blessed are the poor.

And here’s the thing, if you’re one of those people living on less than \$2 a day, if all of a sudden you get a micro-loan of \$100 that lets you buy a sewing machine, fabric, and thread to start a small tailoring business, and you begin to earn \$4 a day, your life has changed dramatically, right?

Maybe, instead of having to send your child with your one plastic bucket to the well every day to get water, you can now pay to have a well dug and your child can go to school every day. Her future has just gotten a whole lot brighter. Blessed are the poor.

Speaking of schooling—another quiz question from Rosling: Worldwide, 30-year-old men have spent 10 years in school, on average. How many years have women of the same age spent in school? Right, multiple choice. A. 9 years; B. 6 years; C. 3 years.

How many think 9? How many think 6? How many think 3? The answer is 9. You're catching on those of you who answered A. And this is a huge, global change that has happened just over the last 20 years, again. Literacy has spread dramatically around the globe for both men and women. Keep those two thoughts in your head. This is still bad. Women are behind by a year. There's catching up and work that we still have to do. But in 1600, to put a really long perspective into this, the average literacy rate was one percent: one out of 100 people could read. Today, that number is 86.3 percent around the globe. That still leaves 13.7 percent of people out of reading. So blessed are those who are excluded, those left behind, those illiterate. Let's help them read.

One last question from Rosling: How many of the world's one-year-old children today have been vaccinated against disease? A. 20 percent. B. 50 percent. C. 80 percent.

How many say 20. Okay, you're starting to catch on to this. How many say B. 50 percent? How many say 80? The answer is 80 percent.

Once again, the most hopeful answer is the fact, and Rosling's book is simply full of stories that really make statistics interesting, you know, lots of bubble graphs and things like that. And vaccination, this is huge that this happened, again, in just the last 20 years. They prevent pandemics as the recent measles outbreak in the Pacific Northwest highlights for us, right? This is huge, and yet here's the thing: only 13 percent of people around the world answer that question accurately in Rosling's blind surveys. And in relationship to all of his questions, he would have gotten better results – and he gave the survey to the World Bank, to the World Economic Forum the people gathered in Davos and the scores were less than 33 percent correct among these people who know the world, right? – he would have done better, he said, if he'd given three different colored red balls to chimpanzees and had them throw them out onto a field in response to the answers to the question.

And so why is it that we don't know how the world has changed? Well, I'd encourage you to check out Rosling's book. I'm sure we can order a copy for our library. I don't see Cathy here today. Maybe we already have one. She's usually ahead of me on ordering things for our library. But if you want to take the rest of the quiz, just take out your Smartphone. Go ahead; take out your phone if you have one. And you can Google "factfulness quiz." Just Google that phrase, and you can find it and you can take the rest of the 10 questions and see how you do on this quiz. And now that I made you get your phones out, I really have to wrap this up.

So my point is simply this: God's way is wider than we can possibly imagine. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the persecuted. And those of us in the middle? We have a role to play in growing God's beloved community here and around the globe. Take hope. Share with others. Love even your enemies. And all God's people say: Amen.

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Psalm 1; Luke 6:17-26
February 17, 2019