

SCRIPTURE:

Isaiah 43:4a:

Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

Luke 6:17-26:

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

‘Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.’

SERMON: “Restoration & Healing; Wholeness & Love” The Rev. Brent Damrow

It was a day in Maine when I decided I needed new shoes. It was in the middle of my sabbatical. My Dad had spent a week with me, and he had just left. My family, Jon and Jake, were yet to come up to spend Thanksgiving week with me. The day was cold but calm. It was cloudy but somehow not gloomy. So I did what I did on sabbatical. I grabbed my phone and my headphones, and I put on my shoes to head out the door for a walk.

On that particular day there was a book that I was anxious to encounter. For you see, an important part of my sabbatical was to expand, was to allow newness to come in and to listen to new voices, to open up to truth and beauty and wisdom where I could find it. I intentionally brought a whole bunch of faith-related books, but only new ones. And ones from authors I hadn’t read before, people who I was anxious to encounter and hear what they had to say.

The book that was on my phone for that day to listen to was a book called “Wisdom Jesus,” written by Cynthia Bourgeault who is an Episcopal priest and part of the wisdom movement. She wonders out loud and publicly and intellectually and theologically and forcefully what it might have been like if the wisdom movement that was pretty strong at the time of Jesus had maintained that strength, rather than Rome being the one to endorse the religion.

You see, this book of hers – and her name had come up numerous times in texts that I had read while in Big Sur or on the train – and so I was anxious to find out more about who this person

was that folks like Richard Rohr and others couldn't get enough of. Her writing and her perspectives drew me in.

With headphones on, there's always a danger, because you don't exactly know what other people hear outside. So there are a number of times where I know I said "amen." And maybe it was good that I was in the country in Maine, so that people didn't wonder! And other times, I literally stopped along the side of the road, because I couldn't keep walking and think that deeply at the same time.

Sometimes I felt uncomfortable, other times uplifted, sometimes confused. But I know this. Every single time I came to an intersection, and I knew that one road would take me back towards Camden and the other would take me away from it, I always chose to keep walking away from Camden so that I could keep listening to this book, so that I could keep walking.

And that was the day that I knew I needed new shoes. Literally, because my old shoes weren't up to the task. By the time I got back, my feet were sore and blistered. It was one of those 6 or 7 hour walks. It was awesome. But I also knew I needed new spiritual shoes. For in those moments of discovery, I found a path both more gentle and kind, and at the same time more rugged and demanding. I found a path that was compelling and life-giving.

And I couldn't help but think about that path as I encountered Luke's telling of the Beatitudes. Poor Luke. Most people in the church would claim that Luke is their favorite gospel. They point to all sorts of stories. But when it comes to the Beatitudes, Luke always loses out to Matthew. I have heard Matthew's Beatitudes at weddings and funerals, at ordinations and confirmations. At any momentous time that the mysteries of life and faith come together, Matthew's Beatitudes are trotted out. And Luke's? I'm not sure if I can remember a single time that somebody chose to go with both the blessings and, well, the woes of Luke. And maybe it is because of those woes, maybe it's because Luke points out that the shoes that we have picked out for our journey may not be up to the task. The path that we've decided to follow may be more about what *we* want to see rather than where Jesus wants us to go. Or just as importantly, where we take our eyesight.

In this passage, Luke gives us so many gifts here, including where Jesus goes himself to offer this wisdom, this teaching. Jesus in Luke, unlike in Matthew, doesn't go up to any lofty place. He comes down. Jesus seeks to be in a level place. Think about that word for a moment. Be in a *level* place. You'll notice in the scripture reading something that I hadn't noticed before. Luke points out that there are throngs of disciples following Jesus, not just twelve. Let's not limit. But Jesus stands in that level place with us and all who come to hear him and to be healed. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus goes up on that mountain to that high and holy place, and beckons our gaze upward to see heaven. Not a bad thing ever. But Luke has Jesus looking up at us.

I imagine Jesus kneeling down to heal those people who have gathered, to comfort them, to care for them. And if we are to look at Jesus in Luke's Beatitudes, we also have to see those who are poor and hungry, because he is there with a hand on their shoulder. We have to see those who are weeping, hated, scorned, or left behind, for that is where Jesus is, and that is where Jesus calls us to go. Luke's Beatitudes are not lofty goals for righteous living. They go beyond pure hearts that

are hungering for righteousness right to the very engagement of it all – getting down into the trenches to kneel with Jesus in service.

As we go through Luke this year, never forget that Luke's gospel at its heart is about the Kingdom of God drawing near. Jesus says it dozens of times. All of Jesus' healings and teachings and miracles in some ways give us a glimpse of what God is already doing, a glimpse into the Kingdom of God that has drawn near already, even if not yet fully. And if you remember also, Luke's gospel always invites us to respond, to take it in and then to follow, to take Jesus' path in bringing the Kingdom of God ever more fully into vision and focus for those who need it, which includes us.

This reading in Luke's gospel offers a perspective of where lofty aspirations to goodness, maybe even Godliness, can be found. Not just up there, but down here. Down on our knees, practicing the presence of Jesus through care and compassion to real people, because we know they are out there. It isn't to ignore the abundance of life, but rather turning toward the very abundance of life by turning toward one another.

By realizing exactly what the Kingdom of God is all about, the woes cannot be ignored in this passage, but neither can the rest of the Bible. After all, the Psalms and Isaiah are resplendent with images of prosperity, fullness, laughter and community upbuilding. And I want you to notice who offers all of them. In John 10, Jesus says he came to bring life that you might have it abundantly. Then again, there is that text in Psalm 23 where God or Jesus the Shepherd says I set a table before you with a feast, with cups overflowing. Again, there's Isaiah speaking for God, saying upon that mountain God's going to make a rich feast for all peoples, and God is going to swallow up death. In Genesis and Job, God brings laughter to impossible situations. And of course, in our Kids' Time passage for today, God honors us, God speaks well of us, God offers us love. All of these things are Biblically sound. All of them, in fact, are how God wants us to live. And all of them are about what God has been and is still doing in creation.

What Jesus does, what Luke does, is to simply invite us to become part of what God is already doing. Taking the long road to do what Jesus did. To come down to a level place to really be with people. Those things of abundance, Luke cautions, Jesus cautions, are not the goals by which we seek for our own gratitude or comfort. They are not what we turn to or strive for. They are rather how we make ourselves part of what God is already doing, bringing about the Kingdom of God. When we align ourselves fully in a level place with others, all those things unfold. And they unfold in an equal level shared place of ministry.

John the Baptist in Luke's gospel, the one who prepared the way for Jesus, when people said why turn around, why do all of this, John was pretty clear. If you have food, share it. If you have two coats, give one of them away. In Luke's gospel, Jesus, filled with the Spirit, comes to draw the Kingdom of God near, to turn our hearts toward one another, to refuse to settle or to stop until restoration and healing, until wholeness and love are the hallmarks not just of our lives, but all of our lives together.

I was overjoyed last week to get calls and emails from many of you to respond to my sermon from last week, about the fact that a new opening is coming, that we need to be prepared to meet

this new world with the things that we have learned in the midst of this pandemic. Many people said they were inspired, but many of them said, but Brent, you didn't tell us exactly how to do it. Fair enough. And I'm not going to today. But at the core of today's passage is what helps us to start thinking about how we come to those answers. In these times, where so many voices out there proclaim wisdom and yet they stoke division, people ask what does standing *for* something actually look like in these moments where new life seems possible and just around the corner? I think that where this passage is helpful is it frames it in a way we can imagine it. It offers a corrective that maybe we shouldn't be standing for something at all, but rather instead maybe we should be kneeling. Kneeling in love, service, care and compassion.

One of the things that kept me walking on that day in Maine, one of the things that kept me turning to keep on walking even if I didn't know where that road went, was that I was more anxious to keep learning, even if my feet were killing me, rather than to get home to what was a beautiful and comfortable place where mountain meets the sea.

In that book was the kernel of truth that Cynthia Bourgeault points to and I think opens this whole passage. It's the kernel of wisdom that she says no longer lets her go back to anything else. It's what she thinks makes Jesus so radically transformative and so life-giving. Not just in this passage in Luke, but always and with every choice, Jesus intentionally descended and let go. Yes, being born in Bethlehem. Yes, coming down from the mountain to teach. Yes, even being taken down from the cross and descending into the depths of depth and hell itself. But also Bourgeault notices throughout his ministry, by making the choice, always the choice of self-lowering to serve, always a choice of giving everything away, so that Jesus refused to cling to anything but God's love and the love of neighbor. Filled with that love, Jesus might always be available to everything and everyone wherever and whenever they had need.

Jesus offers us a radical gift of wisdom. Not one that eschews the abundance of life, because after all, Jesus brought life abundantly. Think of his first miracle and all that wine. But he turns to a greater abundance, one that can be found when we let go, when we descend, when we turn *for*. And when we kneel with the sick, the poor, the grieving, we not only look them in the eyes. It's in those moments I believe we come face to face with Jesus himself. It's in those moments that we don't just offer healing, but rather we ourselves find the healing that we need. We transcend following Christ to becoming Christ, both here in the world itself, walking, walking, walking in the way of truth and life, on the roads paved with love in the Kingdom of God. If that isn't a journey worth getting new shoes for, I don't know what is.

I want to close my sermon this morning with another author that I found on my sabbatical, far more ancient than Cynthia Bourgeault, but who is opening my heart and faith up in equally profound ways. His name is Thomas a Kempis. In his book, "The Imitation of Christ," a Kempis writes about the transformation in our heart that leads to spiritual growth. I was stunned to find that, apart from the Bible, no book has been translated into more languages than Thomas a Kempis' "The Imitation of Christ." In a daily devotional I got at the monastery in Big Sur, I want to read you one of the passages from that book that outlines what he calls for us to do. He speaks through the mouth of Jesus, that we might take up the invitation of Jesus.

Friends, hear these words: “My friend, let go of yourself and you will find me. If you wholly give yourself into my hands and take nothing back, you shall have me. Some persons surrender themselves to me but they hold something back. They do not trust me fully and go on trying to provide for themselves. Others at the beginning offer all of themselves to me, but when a difficult time comes, they put their trust back in themselves. Such persons will never know perfect peace and freedom of heart. Give all for all and hold back nothing. Stand purely and strongly and steadfastly in me, and you shall have me. You shall be so free in heart and in soul that darkness shall never have power over you. Seek out. Study. Pray for this freedom of spirit that I speak of. Seek always in your heart to be free of everything that binds you, that in love you may die to yourself and to all worldly things, and blessedly live to me. If you do this, all unimportant questions shall fade and go away. Crippling fear and misplaced love shall die in you. You shall live in me, and I shall live in you.”

Friends, let us pray. Loving God, descend to our hearts, we pray. Open us up with courage and hope and grace and humility, that we may find you, traveling ever downward into peace and love and family. Amen.