

Sermon For November 6, 2016 - "No More Ladders"

November 6, 2016

All Saints Sunday

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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No More Ladders

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

In American culture, there's a lot of emphasis on going up. We value upward mobility. We say, "Things are looking up, onward and upward, it's on the up and up." We want faith to be uplifting and to provide mountain top experiences.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, the version more familiar to us than the version we heard from Luke today, seems to fit our religious sensibilities. According to Matthew, it happened up on a mountaintop and it seems to lay out qualities we should aspire to achieve. We should become poor in spirit, or humble; we should become merciful; we should hunger and thirst for righteousness; we should strive to ascend to great heights of faith like saints before us. (I actually don't think that is what Jesus is saying in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but it's how it often gets interpreted.)

The way Luke remembers Jesus' famous sermon doesn't let us go there at all. Luke's version, and the whole Gospel of Luke, upends all our "moving on up" thinking. For one thing, in the Gospel of Luke Jesus doesn't give his sermon from lofty mountain heights. He has been up on a mountain praying but then, we're told, "He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people and began to heal them." Rather than remaining at lofty heights, Jesus came down into the midst of the crowd of people who were vulnerable and in need and said, "Blessed are you who are poor"- not poor in spirit like Matthew says, just poor; "Blessed are you who are hungry"- not hungry for righteousness, as in Matthew, but just plain hungry; "Blessed are you who are down and out, downcast, at the bottom of the ladder. God is with you, God is here to help you. You are blessed. And woe to you who are high up on the pecking order. You may not know it now but you are in a really perilous position, clinging to the top of a rickety ladder, trusting in wealth and honor rather than God. You are in for a great fall."

Back in Jesus' day, this was pretty radical stuff. Wealth was considered a sign of God's favor and poverty a sign of God's judgement. To say that God was with the lowly was a challenge to the whole religious order that kept some on top and other below. In our day, things have changed a lot but we still tend to look down on the poor and look up to the wealthy. The poor are judged for not being able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. And even if we reject that bootstrap mentality, many of us still prefer to avoid a lot of contact with people who are really downcast or really down and out. We much prefer uplifting, upbeat stories about people who overcome great odds, inspiring rags to riches stories. We also tend to think that we are where we are on the economic and social ladders because of our own striving and upstanding moral character. We disregard all the other accidents and privileges that have positioned us where we are. So to hear Jesus bless those at the bottom and critique those of us who are quite wealthy, by global standards, is pretty unsettling. What do we make of all this?

Is Jesus just reversing the whole ladder by putting the poor on top and bringing the rich down into judgement? Luke tells us over and over that Jesus has come to lift up the poor and bring down the mighty. So is Jesus just flipping the ladder around? That's how some have interpreted it. Then our only hope really is to try to become poor. Except that in Jesus, we see that God is really not interested in ladders, in having people on top and people on the bottom, people trying to scramble up and people looking down on others. Rather God longs for us all to have abundant life together in God. So God in Jesus is doing something much more radical than just changing who gets to be on top and who has to be on the bottom. God is lifting up the poor and bringing down the mighty so that we'll all be on the same level place with one another.

God is making all the ladders tumble and fall onto level ground so that they become paths that connect us to one another. None of us is better than another, none of us deserves to be higher or lower. We all are vulnerable and valuable, we all are dependent upon God and one another. Woe to us when we think people's value comes from the heights they have achieved rather than from God. Woe to us when we think wealth will protect us from vulnerability and depend upon wealth rather than God. Woe to us when we think we're saints because we're nice people. Rather, we live out our God given identity as saints of God when we acknowledge that we are vulnerable and look to God and when we honor the value of all people.

Jesus came down from the mountain to challenge all ladder-like thinking, to lift up the lowly and bring down the mighty so that all could be connected there in that level place. Jesus does the same today. Jesus is here among us to bless and heal all who are poor, hungry and reviled and to comfort all who weep. Jesus is also here among us to bring us down from the perilous heights of trusting ourselves and judging others. Jesus is here to help us know our connection to one another in the communion of saints. Jesus is here to help us experience the abundant life God gives us now and forever.

Thanks be to God.