

Sermon for Sunday, February 17, 2019 - "A Level Place for All"

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 17, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, I invite you to take a few deep breaths.
Breathe in and out for a moment to quiet and open your heart and mind. Amen.

"Things are looking up! Onward and upward! It's on the up and up." Our language conveys the common idea that moving up is good; and moving down is bad.

We often want our faith to be uplifting and upbeat, to raise our spirits and provide mountaintop experiences. We want role models in the faith so we can look up to them.

That may be why this passage from Luke, Jesus' sermon given on a level place, is jarring. With all those woes, it's kind of a downer, not very uplifting.

There's another version of this sermon in the Gospel of Matthew, commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. That feels more upbeat. It offers just blessings, not blessings and woes. It seems to fit our religious sensibilities better than Luke's version. According to Matthew, Jesus gives his sermon from the rarified air of a mountaintop and it sounds like Jesus is talking about spiritual qualities we should aspire to have. 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 faithfulness. I actually don't think that's what Jesus is saying in the Sermon on the Mount, but it's how it often gets interpreted.

The author of the Gospel of Luke remembers and interprets Jesus' famous sermon very differently. The way he describes Jesus' sermon really 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. In Luke, Jesus 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 on high, Jesus comes down into the midst of the crowd of people who are downtrodden and vulnerable and says, "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 honors you. God is here to help you. You are blessed."

And, Jesus continues, "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."

Jesus' sermon in Luke turns the onward and upward stuff on its head saying that God shows special care and favor to the lowly and downtrodden, that God challenges and convicts those who are high and mighty.

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 huge challenge to the whole religious and social order, the order that kept some on top and others below.

In our day, things have changed somewhat; 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, we often find it challenging to have a lot of contact with people who are really downcast or really down-and-out. It's easier to be around inspiring people who have overcome great odds, who have uplifting rags to riches stories. We want to see progress, we want people to be upbeat. It's hard to stay engaged with people who aren't moving up. 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 accidents and privileges that have positioned us there.

So, when Jesus blesses those at the bottom and critiques those of us who are quite wealthy, by global standards - well that's 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 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 now and forever. God longs to draw us all into abundant life-giving community. 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 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, when we depend upon wealth rather than God. Blessed are we when needs draw us into relationship with God and others.

It is important to note here, too, that when Jesus is talking about blessings and woes, he isn't talking about who gets to go up to heaven and who is going to be sent down to hell. He is talking about the kingdom of heaven coming on earth, among us, here and now. Jesus is working to bring us all into abundant life with God and one another now and forever.

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 today in word and song, bread and wine, and in the body of Christ to lift up and bring down. He comes to bless and heal all who are poor, hungry and reviled, to comfort all who weep. Jesus is here to convict and challenge us when we trust ourselves and judge others, and to bring us down from the perilous heights. Jesus does this for us today so that we might taste and participate in God's dream for the whole world, so that we might be sent out from this level place to join Jesus in working for this dream.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.