

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our appointed Gospel lesson today, we hear that Jesus came down with the twelve and stood on a level place. At this place, this level place, Jesus stands amongst a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. As he stands in the midst of all these categorized people from all these different places, we hear him preach four Beatitudes as well as the opposite of the Beatitudes or the anti-Beatitudes...woe to you. On one side, blessed are you...and on the other, woe to you.

So, here we sit today, listening and more than likely asking ourselves, “Where am I in this?” “Am I blessed or am I cursed?” If we are looking at this lesson today from this perspective, then we may also want to ask, “Am I a Judean, am I Jerusalemite, or am I Hebrew or am I Arabic?” Looking at those gathered that came from the coast of Tyre and Sidon we can ask, “Am I Lebanese, Am I a Galilean?”

Sadly before we consider anything about this sermon from Jesus, if we simply just want to know, “Where am I in this?” “Am I blessed, am I cursed?” we then are merely hearing division within this sermon from Jesus and revealing our quintessential human nature.

When we hear and consider this sermon from Jesus today, we do so in our time and in our context and we hear it in a divisive manner because it is our human nature that is nurtured and formed within the context we live in and reinforced and strengthened by our social media. While technology and social media was not a factor when Jesus preached this sermon, it is now and it now has a bearing on how we hear it and interpret it.

No doubt, technology and social media has made some great improvements in our lives, however, technology has also connectivity made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumors. Despite this, we still feel we are more informed, however technology has isolated, categorized, and divided us even more. We seem to now exist through these divisive categories that undergird and form our perspective on various things in our lives, based on or centered in our interests and the social groups in which we identify. These groups can be defined by race, age, ability, gender, sexuality, religion, politics, wellness, and many other identifying markers.

Today our media zeros in on these markers and bombards us and feeds on these identifying markers and uses them for anything from shopping, to the type of news we want to hear...anything from social interests, to relationships, even to supporting our own opinions that we term as our philosophy or our facts. We then use these divisive tools to distract from or to amplify our philosophies and facts, to simply gain a leg up on the others. In other words, we use these divisive categories to step on others in order to elevate ourselves...“my sin is certainly NOT as bad as their sin and I can show you why according my philosophy and my facts. And when stepping on others to elevate ourselves, we do so with the misinformation that is all around us in our media landscape that sees malleable facts to be the elevating stepping stones that leave truths distant and elusive.

So, we hear the Beatitudes today as, I am blessed because you are not, so, woe to you. Is Jesus really saying that it's us-vs-them? Or is Jesus addressing our complacency about these issues and attempting to show us a better way than the status quo?

Since we are beings who turn to others in order to make up our minds,¹ the divisiveness within our culture on a variety of social and moral issues is going to influence how we hear this Gospel text today. This divisive thinking about this Gospel is so embedded in our thinking that it's hard to see beyond the rich and the poor, the happy and the sad, the glutton and the starving, and the hated and the loved because this is status quo for us. We understand blessings and woes or those who are cursed, as a system of reward and punishment that are determined within our constructs and our conclusions. And in our systems, we claim our blessedness and give our condescending thanks to God for all God has rewarded us with and we in turn ignore the others. Is God only present in our lives to reward us with earthly things or are we to look past the status quo for something beyond this life?² Moreover, in our systems of blessings and woes, we determine who is blessed and it is God who carries out our revenge on those we curse. In other words, I'm blessed so woe to you because you are not on the side I determine as the blessed side.

In the preaching of Jesus that is before us today, I hear Jesus attempting to reveal for us this divisive gap that has become a significant driver in our culture, in our thinking, and in our faith when it is fueled with misinformation that drives this social division like a wedge between us all...and certainly drives us farther from our Lord and the intent of the Good News that Jesus is attempting to share with us.

Before we even get to the Beatitudes and the woes, look at what the Gospel is teaching us. We hear in just a few verses before our Gospel lesson picks up today... that after a night of prayer on the mountain Jesus calls his disciples and heads down the mountain to the people gathered to hear him. Within the opening line of the Gospel lesson, we hear Luke say this:

Jesus *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. (Luke 6:17, italics my emphasis)

Luke continues:

¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits *were cured*. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him *and healed all of them*, (Luke 6:18-19).

All were cured and all were healed at that level place where Jesus stood with all those different folks, from all those different places, and with all those different ailments. No one or no illness is singled out, nor is one group of people singled out as more deserving than the next.

“A level place”...all are on the *same* level. Luke is telling us that Jesus *COMES DOWN* to our level just as God reached down into the dust to form us as human beings in the very beginning of the Bible.

¹ David Brooks, New York Times, editorial in the *Lancaster News Paper*, LNP, February 12, 2022, page A13, quotes the work of René Girard.

² Looking beyond the status quo is inspired by the commentary on Luke 6:17-26 by Mary Hinkle Shore, an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and a former professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary. Rev. Shore posted her commentary on www.workingpreacher.org

I love this image of Jesus coming down to a level place because for me, it shows that when we attempt to elevate ourselves by stepping on others, we are no longer on the level with Jesus. Just before Jesus calls Levi in the prior chapter of Luke's Gospel we hear:

¹⁸Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; ¹⁹but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. (Luke 5:18-19)

Look at the image of this story; they lower the paralytic to Jesus. They do not step on others or push aside the others in the crowd, they lower him down to Jesus to that level place. And look also how the faith of the four also carries and supports the faith of the paralyzed man.

Look also at the image of the opening of our worship today when we *ALL* confess our sins. By the very sin we confess we place ourselves on the same level with one another and Jesus Christ comes to us here in this place, reminding us through Word and Sacrament that we too are healed of the illness of our sin. Our sin and our need for forgiveness puts us on that level with Jesus...the one who heals us all.

When we divisively view this passage with these Beatitudes, do we even hear that those in the crowd were healed, or are we too busy following the status quo wondering where we can position ourselves with blessings or woes even after we have been healed of our own illness of sin. Jesus came down to the people and stood among the crowd. Today, within this gathering here at St. Paul, we too are disciples of Jesus Christ just like those who followed and gathered around Jesus back then. But in this crowd today, like the crowd back then gathered around Jesus there may be some who were rich and some poor, some whose bellies are full and some who are hungry, and some who are laughing and some with heavy hearts...nonetheless, all who stand with Jesus stand on the same level of need and the level of cure and healing. Jesus is not looking down upon this crowd in this lesson or upon this crowd gathered here today...Jesus is not separating them or us or categorizing them or us...he is present with them at that level place just as he is with us today in this place that has been leveled with the confession of our sin, and in his presence in Word and in Sacrament, Jesus is healing us all.

We cannot categorically maneuver ourselves to be blessed, because we are already blessed, we are healed of our sin. Before the blessings and the woes in this Gospel lesson today we hear that Jesus comes down to the crowds and stands with them and heals and cures them all. Within this crowd that has gathered here today are a variety of people coming from a variety of places seeking the same healing forgiveness and salvation, placing us all on the same level of need. But the issues that confront us...be they blessings or woes or curses...they will not define us as we define ourselves...Jesus stands with us and in his presence, we are healed of our sin. We are not defined or divided we are healed by the very Son of God, Jesus Christ who stands among us this today, in Word and Sacrament...may we rejoice and sing, for ours is the kingdom of God...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen