

On the Mountain and on the Plain

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Texts: Luke 6: 17-26

L: Let us pray.
Source of all truth and love,
by your holy word,
enlighten our hearts and our pathways
by the ancient story we are about to hear.
show us a way out of our discouragement and fear,
a way into your hope and love. Amen.

Luke 6:17-26

17 He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, **18** who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, **19** and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

20 Looking at his disciples, he said:

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

21 Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

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

22 Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

23 “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

24 “But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.

25 Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26 Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The beatitudes- a message that is so important to Jesus’ ministry that Jesus preaches this sermon twice that we know of, but probably many times more- once in the gospel of Matthew and once in the gospel of Luke. And in two different locations: once on a mountaintop and once on a level place, or plain. The two moments we get to hear the beatitudes are not merely two versions of the same story, but two separate times Jesus is relaying his message to his disciples and the people gathering around him seeking healing.

I’ve sometimes felt uncomfortable about how this version of the beatitudes is read and interpreted. And I think it has something to do with the word, “Woe.” W-O-E. Is Jesus really doling out blessings and curses to folks based on whether they are laughing or mourning? Rich or poor? “Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.” Something about that doesn’t sit right with me. I wondered, could this mean something else? And that’s when I came across a bit of wisdom in a commentary by Karoline Lewis drawing our attention to the fact that the word “Woe” has an older synonym meaning “alas” or “alack,” and is grammatically an interjection, like Aw! Hurray! Look! Or Hey! She suggests that Jesus is using this word to get his people’s attention rather than curse them. As I

read that helpful tidbit, I thought to myself, it's almost as if Jesus is saying with those woe's, "Blessed are you who are paying attention! Pay attention to the beloved-ness of these neighbors of yours!" The Beatitudes are a sermon about Jesus flipping the paradigms of success in the world upside down, but perhaps Jesus is also, in that flipping, inviting us to pay attention to the ways in which God leads us into true relationship with one another and the fullness of God's grace when we work towards making the world a better place.

Over the years as I kept learning about the beatitudes, along the journey I was once invited to see the blessings not as prescriptive, as in, in order to be blessed you need to be poor, hungry or weeping, but as descriptive. I was asked, what if Jesus was seeing people around him who were poor, who were weeping and hungry and was pointing to them and calling them blessed? What if he was saying blessed are you who are grieving the loss of a parent? Blessed are you who are struggling with depression? Blessed are you who are caretakers of someone with chronic illness? Blessed are you who are in between jobs and not sure of the way forward in your careers? To those who weren't struggling, what if with each "woe," Jesus was calling them into seeing their neighbor's blessedness as well?

Jesus was paying attention to the people who were coming to him for healing and calling them already blessed by God. And perhaps he was inviting those who were comfortable according to the current worldly standard of being blessed to pay attention to their beloved-ness with him. He was creating relationship when there previously was none. By flipping the societal script of who is on the mountain and who is in the valley he brought them all into a level place together. He made them more human by helping them pay attention to the grace and love of God available to them all despite what the world said. Woe as an interjection that leads us to pay attention to the overflowing connections between us, God, and neighbor. That sounds more like Jesus to me.

I've been listening to this podcast "All My Relations" for a couple of years now. The hosts are two millennial women, Matika Wilbur of the Tulalip and Swinomish peoples and Adrienne Keene a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. They talk about what it means to be a native person in the modern world with their guests that they have on the show. They named their podcast "All My Relations" because "to be an Indigenous person is to be engaged in relationships—relationships to land and place, to a people, to non-human relatives, and to one another."

Luckily, last week I had a need for some podcast listening. Some family friends were in Hawaii for an extended period and they invited me to visit them and I took them up on their offer. I flew out to the big island of Hawaii last week for 7 days with them and 2 days to travel there. The plane rides were so worth it. On one of my 12-hour flights I noticed that the podcast “All My Relations” had a three-part episode series on Hawaii and so I had to listen to it. One of the issues the episodes focus on is the protection of Hawai’i’s biggest mountain, Mauna Kea, from government scientists and private companies installing a 30-meter telescope on the land. This fight to preserve one of the most sacred sites for native Hawaiians has been going on since the 80’s when the US government first started to build on this sacred place without required permits. Since 2014 native Hawaiians and their allies have been camping on the mountain, demonstrating and fighting to keep this land, this ‘āina, away from harm. One of the women whom they interviewed who had been in the lines of people protecting the mountain quoted a woman who she met while on Mauna Kea: “She said, she was standing amongst hundreds of women, she didn’t know but was destined to love. And to me, it captured so fully what we were doing in this movement.” She goes on and says,

“This mountain is gonna outlive every single one of these telescopes even as it’s continuously degraded and molested by our human activity, and our desecration, it will live beyond us. The mauna gives us an opportunity to come back into our humanity as Hawaiians, to love and live on ‘āina in the way that our kupuna or ancestors did and to love each other the way that we were always destined to love each other...It’s that deep feeling of commitment to each other that we felt in those lines, to the point where it became very clear to me within seconds, that I wasn’t just standing there to protect the mountain, but that I would give my life to protect any other women next to me, most of them, I didn’t even know their names.”

Apologies for the long quote, but it was just too good not to share. I have to admit by this point in my listening journey I was trying to wipe a couple of tears away before they could hit my mask or strangers could see. She came to the mauna to defend the land that is a part of who she is. She left the mauna knowing her calling was to love the movement, but also to love and protect the people around her. She found her deep sense of belonging by paying attention in the midst of pursuing her own calling.

In the third installment of this series, they reference the movement to protect Mauna Kea as a movement of abolition. One of the interviewees quotes someone who said, “abolition means we build

pu‘uhonua (Poo-oo-hon-u-a), within each other, to my own people.” She encourages the listeners to think about what it means to build places of refuge within each other, to create sustainable security and health and wellbeing in our communities while working to make the world a better place. I looked up the word pu‘uhonua (Poo-oo-hon-u-a), and it means “a place of refuge, a flat land, a level place.”

The work of protecting this sacred land is ongoing and it feels insurmountable to those in the movement, much like many of the callings to justice we have in our own lives. When we are called to follow Jesus’ way of flipping the world’s paradigms upside down, the love and joy present in true relationship are found. Are we paying attention to it? Where are the places of refuge we create within one another with the help of the Spirit to sustain us in our work? Perhaps it is in that moment we choose to be honest with someone and the newfound trust that blossoms as a result? Or maybe it's in the simple way a member of your household sits next to you in silence and offers you tea after a long day? Perhaps it's in the simple moments where we just let ourselves rest without guilt or shame. When we pause to notice when we have been drawn into a level place in our faith journeys, we pay attention to the healing and connection, love and wholeness already present in our world that is so in need of it, still. Our eyes are opened to where the blessing and beloved-ness reside in each other. Paying attention to that kind of grace and to our shared humanity is something that will sustain us in our callings, whether we are on a mountain, in a valley or a level place. Wherever we are, the beatitudes help me have faith that God is calling us deeper and deeper into love and hope in the process, together. Amen.

