

“Plain Jesus”

Preached by Pastor Brahm Semmler Smith on February 17, 2019

Based on Luke 6:17-26

Partners in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, grace and peace be with you from God our creator, redeemer, and leveler. Amen.

I am not a big concert goer. Something about crowds don't always appeal to me. But there have been times in my life that I have braved the masses to go hear music live because I couldn't pass up the opportunity. The first concert I ever went to, that I actually used my money for, was a Carlos Santana concert in Milwaukee during Summerfest the summer after I graduated high school. Santana was making a comeback, and his songs were all over the radio. I remember that concert being in an amphitheater type setting, where we were sitting high up in the back, able to look down on the stage, our view uninhibited at all of the musicians. Granted, those close up had the better view, the better seats, of course for a cost. But we could all see the source of music and it was a good show.

The second concert I recall today was a different setting altogether. It was in Chicago, at Soldier Field with Sarah and our friends Jon and Amanda, and we were going to see U2. Jon is a major fan of U2, and was able to secure tickets on the field, and your position in regards to the stage was on a first come first served basis. The thing about field level in these giant stadium concerts is that everyone on the field, we are all standing on the same level. Yes, you could get close, but if you weren't right up front, your line of vision could be blocked. So I gave thanks for the beatitude, blessed are the tall, for they can see over people. That is one, isn't it? I could see just fine. But I realized for the shorter people around me, it was at times hard to see Bono and Edge running around and performing and belting out the tunes that we loved so dearly. This level place, while equalizing us out, also caused some issues of seeing the source of what we came to hear and see.

Jesus today in the Gospel of Luke shares with us some teachings, and this teaching comes to us from a level place. A plain. Jesus had just come down from the mountain, he had picked 12 of his disciples to be what Luke calls apostles, those who would carry his message out into the world, and as they come down, Jesus starts to teach these apostles what the kingdom of God looks like.

A couple of things are happening that help to emphasize the points he is about to make. First, there is a crowd gathered, like at a concert. A crowd who had come to experience Jesus, to see him and hear him and to be healed by him. Luke shares that this crowd comes from great distance, come from multiple backgrounds, and come because they are struggling, despondent, cast out, and are looking for hope. They came to find hope in the words and presence of Jesus.

Jesus brings this hope to the crowds, and as he does so, he speaks from a level place, so that he is not raised up above these crowds in need of healing, but is in their midst, in their suffering, in their pain, Jesus moves to be on the same level as these folks. In this crowd, we have those

seeking healing, we have his disciples, we have his super disciples, the 12 apostles, and we have those who were probably curious to see and hear what this Jesus had been doing.

In moving into a level area, all these people are on the same level of Jesus. And on the same level as each other. Perhaps their views and ability to hear him are compromised, because he comes down from the high place onto their level. Maybe that is Jesus' point, to emphasize the communal nature of his message. He begins to teach in their midst, and he says:

Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry. Blessed are the weeping. Blessed are those who are reviled and hated because they try to follow me, and in following me lift up the realm of God in this world.

He doesn't stop. I kind of think we wished he would have stopped. Cursed are the rich. Cursed are the full. Cursed are the laughing. Cursed are the ones who are spoken well of in the community, the well-respected leaders, business owners, politicians, and pastors.

Jesus levels us. He lifts up those in the valleys, and brings down us on the mountains. In doing so, he reiterates this main theme of Luke, this main purpose of Jesus that begins with Mary singing at the beginning of Luke in the Magnificat that God blesses the poor and lowly, and casts down the strong and powerful, and continues when Jesus is preaching in his home synagogue that he has come to bring good news to the poor and release the captives and oppressed, and Jesus speaks it again now. And it will not be the last time in Luke.

God does not value what we value. In Jesus, God has come to remind us of that. Jesus' words in Luke are blunt and to the point. They reverse what society valued during Jesus' life, what they saw as blessings and curses. And I would argue that our society is not that far off from those reversals, either. Here's what I hear in the world around me:

Blessed are the rich, for they earned all their money. Blessed are the full, for they deserve their food and their dessert, too. Blessed are the laughing, because living the good life is what it is about. Blessed are those who are wise, and smart, and powerful, and everyone wants to be like them, because that is how the world works.

But cursed are the poor, for they are lazy. Cursed are the hungry immigrant, because they are their own country's problem, and not ours. Cursed are the weeping, because they should get their emotions under control. Cursed are those who follow Jesus in this world, because why would anyone put God before themselves and their own desires?

God does not value what we value. And Jesus' teaching today make this clear and make us uncomfortable. If we are honest with ourselves, I find myself representing more closely those who are woe'd than those who are blessed.

Jesus levels us today. It is like we are at a concert, all on the same field level, all with the same ticket, to hear the Word of God come through Jesus Christ amongst the masses of people that he loves. And this is the good news for us. For those who are truly destitute and starving and weeping and despised, God is on your side. No matter what life throws at you, God is for you and loves you.

For us who are rich, and full, and laughing, and respected? What about us? There is good news, too. God is on our side. But Jesus' words remind us of those things that get in the way of God in our lives. Those things that cause us to lift up ourselves and others, and look down upon those we feel are not up to our level. Those who haven't achieved enough, or earned enough, or are educated enough, or are holy enough. The ones Jesus calls blessed. That is what I see in the woes from Jesus' mouth. Jesus uses these woes to remind us that no matter our stuff, our money, our success, our titles that which makes us right with God has nothing to do with any of those. More often than not, those things get in the way of remembering God in our lives.

This is the radical message of Jesus in Luke. But is it more? Not just a message and lesson, but an invitation by Jesus. That for us, being a disciple of Jesus, there is a cost, and we are invited, called by him, to carry out God's message. A message that involves giving of ourselves so as to level the lives of those most desperate, lowly, poor, and hungry. To take what it is that might distract us from God and use them to help bring about the kingdom of God.

It is not an easy task. But it is Jesus' way. Jesus loves us, and Jesus calls us to follow him. And Jesus shows us the way. Amen.