

First Presbyterian Church
“On the Road Again: Lessons from the Road 1”
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February 13, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-12; Luke 6:17-26

It is currently one of my favorite commercials. The commercial opens with a large group of children gathered in a backyard for birthday party. All the children have on birthday hats. There are balloons. There are adoring parents. It is obvious who the birthday girl is, and before her is a table festooned with presents. A voice asks, which present will you open first? The little girl screams, “That one!” pointing off screen. All the children scream with her and the camera pans to a pony all wrapped up in birthday wrapping paper. The children then all run to the pony to unwrap it. This is one of those “duh” kind of questions, as to which present would be opened first. And it is the same kind of question that the church has been asking itself for the last two hundred years about which set of Beatitudes we would like to open first; the ones in Matthew or the ones here is Luke. And the “duh” answer is, of course Matthew.

I am not sure when I came to know that there was even a set of beatitudes in Luke. Probably in seminary. I certainly didn’t as a child. All I knew was that for my communicant’s class, what we now call confirmation, I had to memorize the beatitudes. What that meant was the beatitudes in Matthew. I’m not sure I ever heard a sermon series or read a book about Luke’s beatitudes...though there have been many given and written. And I am sure that the reason for this is that Matthew’s beatitudes are safe, they are cozy, they are uplifting. They don’t have any woes. They don’t have any, “Woe to you who are rich, or woe to you who are full, or woe to you who are laughing, or woe to you when people speak kindly about you.” Matthew doesn’t have any of that disturbing language. However, my friends, we are on the road with Luke and not Matthew, so the question is what do we do with these beatitudes of woes? How do we understand what they are trying to tell us? The answer, fortunately, can be found in our story from Nehemiah.

I would guess that most of us here this morning, in person or online, have never read Ezra and Nehemiah. But again, those two books tell the story of the people of God returning from exile in Babylon and rebuilding their lives, the city of Jerusalem, and the Temple for YHWH, all of which had been destroyed about fifty years before. One of the things we need to know is that not all the Jews were taken into captivity. The Babylonians needed people to stay behind to till the land, raise the livestock, and pay taxes. Empty land does no one any good. The Jews who were left behind were not allowed to worship YHWH and were surrounded by the cults of other deities. They had memories of YHWH, but not much more. The scene we have before us this morning is the moment when those who had been left behind received the Torah; meaning they heard the Torah read in Hebrew and then had it translated and explained in Aramaic, their language. The response was dramatic. The people wept for joy and celebrated. And it is the reasons for these responses that will shed light on understanding Luke’s beatitudes. So why the responses?

The answer is twofold. First the Torah reminded the people that their God had not forgotten them. That even though they had forgotten God over the 50 years, God had not forgotten them and had returned bringing God's Torah to the people; the Torah which would order and guide their lives. This is why they wept, for forgetting and for being remembered. Second, they went and shared with their neighbors because that was the kind of community that Torah was creating; a community in which every person mattered. Rather than being the kind of society created by the Babylonians in which there were a few powerful and wealthy people, and everyone else was poor and oppressed, the Torah offered a vision for a society in which everyone had enough. A society in which everyone shared their resources. A society in which, while resources were not equally divided, no one went hungry or homeless. Little wonder then that the people wept for joy and celebrated. And it is these two reasons that are reflected in Jesus' Lukan beatitudes.

The first table of blessings are a reminder that God has not forgotten the people. The folks whom Jesus is addressing in Galilee are probably people living on the margins. They are shepherds, or farmers, or day laborers, or small shop keepers. They lived under heavy Roman taxation and were looked down upon by Jews living in Jerusalem and Judea. Their lands were slowly being confiscated by larger landowners and their produce was being shipped to Rome to feed their overlords. And so, when Jesus tells them that they are blessed, meaning beloved by God when they are poor, hungry, weeping and hated, these folks are excited...as excited as those who first heard the Torah read and explained. Jesus' words meant that God had not forgotten them. God had not abandoned them. God was still present loving them. They felt as if the story of the Law and prophets was their story; was God's story. So, what then about the woes?

The woes are warnings and reminders to those who have grown rich, full, comfortable, and complacent. They are warnings to them because the community Torah is intended to create is not one with a few comfortable people and many poor people, but one in which everyone has enough. Jesus understood that one of the interesting parts of human nature is that when people rise to the top of the heap in society, they stop sharing. People who rise to the top of the heap believe that they have done so because God has ordained it so, or because God loves them best, or because they are better than everyone else, or because they work harder than anyone else, and so deserve to be at the top of the heap and keep what they have. There is no need to share. This is simply human nature. The woes are Jesus' way of warning against this attitude. They are a reminder that God's people are called to ensure that all have enough because all of this is God's. They are reminded never to forget those in the first half of the Beatitudes. They are reminded that God desires a society in which there aren't hungry, homeless, forgotten, or unloved people. The woes are a warning because they remind all of us who are comfortable, that we are to work for a world that resembles heaven on earth.

If the woes make you shift a bit in your seat, or make you slightly discomfited, know that they were intended to do so. They were to be a reminder of our obligation to share what we possess and to help create a world that looks like God's kingdom. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I feeling both blessed by God's love for me and challenged to not forget my obligations to the world, as one who has been blessed?