**[1]** Sixth Sunday After Epiphany (Feb 16, 2025)
Sermon Title:  The Sermon on the Plain
Scripture: Luke 6:17-26
Theme: Comparing the geographies of Matthew and Luke (Mount & Plain) as to how they set the tone for the Be-Attitudes.

“He came down (*katabainó - descended*)with them and stood on a level (*pedinos* – level and easy on the feet) 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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.  And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.” (v18, 19)

**[2]** There is a place in north central Georgia in the foothills below Mount Oglethorpe and Mount Sassafras known by the Cherokees as the “Talking Rock.” It was known so among the earliest grandfathers of the tribe, literally ‘rock that talks,’ named for a place where the Cherokees held councils to decide important matters or to meet with other tribes or explorers. (Historian James Mooney) Representatives would descend from the mountains to a level place to engage in conversation and trade. A beautiful and usually serene creek flows through and beside the sacred place making it a perfect place for dialogue and contemplation. Medicine Lodge in southern Kansas and Lake Waconda in north central Kansas were such sacred places for conversation as well. Jesus descended from the higher lands into the plain, into a level place, to meet the people, and to have a conversation with them. Perhaps we might call it the first
conversation sermon, or one of the first. It was a great crowd, not only of the disciples who followed him to this place, but large numbers of people from diverse places, from cities and towns in Judea and from the Mediterranean coast cities of Tyre and Sidon. To many, it must
 **[3]** have seemed reminiscent of the ancient calls to counsel described in Hosea and Jeremiah: ‘the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of this land,’ (Hos. 4:1) or ‘the Lord has a controversy with Judah,’ (Hos. 12:2) ‘the Lord has a controversy with the nations.’ (Jer. 25:31). Micah declares: ‘Hear ye, O mountains, the Lord’s controversy.’ (Mic. 6:2). Come down from the mountains to a level place, a sacred place of equity, to have a dialogue with God, where God will hear your complaints, but you must also hear God’s complaints. God will provide the safety for such a place where you can be honest and be heard, where your concerns can be held in confidence. A place of equity, certainly, at God’s choice, but not equality. A place where confessions imply forgiveness, where to speak the confession goes a long way toward receiving the forgiveness. A place of equity where one may argue honestly with God, reminiscent of Abraham’s famous argument with God about Sodom on the plains of Mamre: ‘will you save the city even if I can find only 10 (ten) people who are righteous or just?’ (Gen 18: forty-five, thirty, twenty, ten …). A place of equity where one may wrestle with God, like Jacob on a level
**[4]** clearing near the ford of the Jabbok, talking with God face to face (Peniel), and walking away with a new name and a new limp (Gen. 32). Why does God want to talk with us? Hosea says it out loud: ‘because truth and mercy are not in the land, because the people do not know God, or what God wants of them.’ (Hos. 4:1). Jesus comes down to deeply listen to the people’s complaints about God. Jesus comes down from the mountains to the talking place to describe
to the people what God wants. Luke calls this conversation-sermon the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6).
**[5]** As the conversation is recorded, it repeats the beginning words from Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5 – Blessed are the poor … ) and even takes the same form and style (Blessed are … ) for the first half of the sermon. But Luke clearly has a very different sermon in mind, or perhaps a much more honest account of the same sermon.

I have called the conversation a sermon, but I think a better description might be a dialogue sermon, a conversational sermon. Part of my Doctor of Ministry Project at Philips Theological Seminary was to engage with what I called “preaching partners” each week for the six week project, and, meeting together, we put together the sermon (and the worship resources) for the next Sunday as a group decision, paying particular attention to group rules and procedures in order to assure respect for each other. Leah Schade’s methodology for purple church guided us.
The point I am making here is that we were learning to preach like Jesus, much like we have learned to pray like Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer. And the model we have for this is the model we have called the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel or the Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s Gospel. So, let’s note here that there is a contextual as well as geographic difference in these two gospels on this topic.

Matthew implies that it was not a sermon, but a teaching, and that it was just for the disciples and not for people generally speaking, since the setting is on a mountain, and of course, not everyone could climb the mountain to be there.   Luke implies that the setting is a level plain, where everyone who wanted to be present, could be present.   If truth be told, however, it would seem that everyone was invited, regardless of the setting.  We are told in both Matthew (chapter 5) and Luke (chapter 6) that a great multitude of people were there to “hear him and be healed,” that indeed there was a “power flowing out of Jesus” that attracted so many to him and made them want to listen.  At one point, we are told that “Jesus lifted his eyes on the disciples” implying that his words were spoken to them.  But at another point, we are told that “Jesus ended his sayings in the hearing of the people.”  There are good cases to be made for both types of audiences.

And the style is different. Listen to this difference.

First, in Luke’s version, Jesus addresses the hearers directly:
   “Blessed are you who hunger NOW, for you shall be filled.”
   “Blessed are you who weep NOW, for you shall laugh.”  (Luke 6:21)

The form of Luke’s sermon specifically is eschatological promise and NOT moral law.  This means that present and future are joined together in meaning.  It is NOT about “**those who** or do or say such and such … ” but it is about “**you who** do or say such and such…”  But, more importantly, the words on the lips of Jesus have power.  They are performative and not proverbial.  What I mean is that they are NOT like proverbs told to a generic audience, those who do such and such can expect such and such.  The words of Jesus have action built into them.  They have the power to perform.  We are NOT permanently restrained by our current status from becoming what Jesus wants and expects us to become.  Jesus tells us what the reign of God will look like and expects us to join in that way of life NOW.  His words call us and lead us by the hand, out of nothing into something, from nobody into somebody.  In our own minds, we are tempted to think, “once poor, always poor,” but in the mind of Jesus, this is not the case.  The powerful words of Jesus call us to change our status in our own minds and in the minds of others.  None of us are ever the sum total of all we have in our possession.  We are so much more than the things we have accumulated in life.  Jesus wants to make sure we know this and believe this. In Luke’s sermon, YOU MATTER!

Secondly, Jesus highlights what it means to love God and to love neighbor, the two most important commandments summing up the First Testament.  The message is NOT “do as you have been done to,” but the message is “do as God has done for you.”  In each of the beatitudes,
as Luke remembers them, God is giving us a new basis for honor in our community.  Instead of each line being read as: “Blessed are…” or “Happy are …” a better reading might be “Honored are …”  By the same token, in Luke’s version of the beatitudes, instead of reading “Woe to you who…” we might better read “How shameless it is to …” To use the word “Blessed are…” we are using an honoring language.  It is not what our society values that defines us, but it is what God values that defines us.  And Jesus is about to tell us specifically what God values, who God values.  In the reign of God, honor falls on all people ostracized from honor, all who are cast out of honor and who are NOT normally honored. Luke’s sermon privileges the poor.

Both Matthew and Luke share the idea of “Be-Attitude,” that we, you and I, are being called into Being what God wants us to be.

Honored are we, the poor in spirit, the poor, the outcast, for ours is the kingdom of heaven.
 (open / shut kingdom). Honor is not about how many material resources you possess.
    Is 57:15 – “For thus says the high and lofty one, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”
    Psalm 34:6 “The poor cried, and the Lord heard, and saved [the poor] out of all troubles.”

Honored are we who mourn, for we will be comforted
    Isaiah 61:2-3 –(2) to comfort all who mourn, (3)  the oil of gladness instead of mourning.

Honored are we, the meek, for we will inherit the earth
    Psalm 37:11 – the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant prosperity
    Numbers 12:3  “Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.” (Moses was acutely aware of his limitations.)

Honored are we who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for we will be filled.
    Isaiah 55:1-2 – everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price ... delight yourself in rich food.    [It is a call to holy living,  devotion to obedience]; The shameless are those who outwardly appear righteous. (28)

Honored are we, who are merciful, for we will receive mercy
     The shameless have neglected mercy. (23)
Honored are we, the pure in heart, for we will see God.
    Psalm 24:4 – those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully.  They will receive blessing from the Lord.
    Job 19:25-26 – “For I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.”
    [the heart is the center of the inner life, the pure participate in reconciling work of peace]
    The shameless are impure. (27)

Honored are we, the peacemakers, for we will be called children of God
    The shameless are the children of Gehenna. (15)
Honored are we, who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for ours is the kingdom of heaven
     [Harassment is a sign of God’s favor, as we see with the prophets.]
     The shameless are the children of those who killed the prophets. (31)

**[6]** “Blessed are we when people hate us, revile us, defame us! Woe to us when all speak well of us!” (Lk 6:22, 26) For our ancestors spoke well of the false prophets; our ancestors reviled the true prophets. It is a badge of honor when people speak ill of us, for we are following in the steps of the prophets, Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, Moses, Samuel. This is a far cry from Paul’s description of a bishop in the church, that outsiders should perceive well of such a person who represents the church (1 Tim. 3:7). Luke is determined that we should sit up and listen, taking to heart the conversation on the plain. Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, on the Level Place, is filled with opposites and reversals. Jesus speaks for God, NOT with what we want to hear, but with what we don’t expect to hear. If we expected to hear this, then we are mistaken. Matthew wants you to hear “poor in spirit (*en pneumati* - spiritually humble),” but Luke wants you to hear “poor (*ptóchos* - beggars).” The hungry will one day be fully fed, we who weep NOW will one day laugh. One day, we who are well-fed NOW may be hungry. One day, we who NOW laugh at others, will be laughed at ourselves.

Who among us does NOT know that reversals happen when we least expect it? Things are going great, and then, suddenly, they are not so great. Riches come and go, but only the unconditional love of God remains the same throughout our lives. Invest in heavenly treasures, NOT in worldly ones. The rich have already received their reward, but our reward, infinitely great, is yet to come.
**[7]** Lend, expecting nothing in return, and **our** reward will be great. A goodly measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over…

Be merciful just as God is merciful. Love our enemies.  Do good to people who hate us. Bless people who curse us. Pray for our abusers.  An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, revenge of all kinds and any kind, only leaves all of us diminished and without hope. Let God be the One who decides. This is the truth about justice and righteousness that God wants us to hear. NOW that we have heard it, what are our complaints about God? What is our part in the conversation? What is it that we hold against God? What has been harmful in our relationship with God? We are within the safety of the Talking Rock. We are under God’s protection. God’s mercy surrounds this place. Take your time. God is deeply listening. Your innermost reality is deeply held in confidence. God will not let us walk away without a long redeeming hug, without sharing tears together.

The world is full of reversals, full of events we do not expect. In all such reversals, but for the grace of God go we. Moreover, we can always expect God to love us and listen to us. God’s compassion always changes the rules for the better, always bends the moral arc of the universe towards love. Though we may be victims of abuse or hostility, we do not allow ourselves to be defined by these. We do not react in kind, abuse for abuse, hate for hate, hurt for hurt, but instead we act intentionally with love, not condemning others or passing judgment upon them. As God has compassion on the ungrateful and unthinking, so we are called to do the same.

Are we upset that God should hold us accountable? Are we upset that God allows us to hold God accountable? This is the radical nature of God’s love that survives all reversals. This is the very nature of covenant, the very essence of relationship. Through Christ, we restore a broken covenant and a strained relationship. We love through our differences and in spite of our differences. We agree to disagree. We agree to allow each other space to be different while inviting each other to be like-minded in faith.  God traces out the walls of our disagreement on the palms of God’s hand (Is 49:16) and works the mystery of love to bring peace, plans for
peace, to the world.  Alleluia. Amen.