

**ROOM FOR ALL AT THE TABLE; LUKE 6: 2-31; REQUEIM FOR THE HOMELESS AND ALL SAINTS; 11.1,3.19; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER CHURCH**

The gospel is a little rough on this All Saints festival. But unlike our loved ones who have joined the company of heaven and “increased in knowledge and love of Thee,” as the *Book of Common Worship* says, we are still here and struggle to know and do the will of God, for as St. Paul wrote, “we see as if in a glass darkly.”

You might say we need all the help we can get. So, Luke decides to use some tough love today to help us get our act together.

Bear with me while we consider Luke’s wake up call. Then let’s circle back to those saints who bring us here today and who’ve joined the church triumphant.

Most of the time we assume that the bible in general and the gospel in particular are to help us live normal, adjusted, healthy lives – like getting regular exercise, eating a balanced diet, and observing moderation in all things.

The goal is to enable us to cope with the rest of life; to align ourselves with the prevailing culture and weather the stress and strain of this complicated world.

But Luke throws sand into the gears of that smoothly running notion of how our modern, well-adjusted lives are to operate. His so-called Sermon on the Plain, which parallels Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, is much less ethereal and way more edgy and off-putting than Matthew. In fact, Luke is downright subversive and threatening.

If we didn’t know better we might accuse Jesus of a bait and switch in this message he delivers on the Plain.

The first four beatitudes invite us to take delight in the fact that the plight of the poor, hungry, grieving and excluded will be reversed. When 45% of the people living in Buffalo and Erie County live below the poverty line according to the Homeless Alliance of WNY, who wouldn’t be glad to see *every other one of our neighbors* get a break, find real relief and an end to their grinding existence.

Not to mention over 5500 people in WNY who are homeless as we speak, half of whom are experiencing homelessness for the first time. What if they didn’t have to figure out how to stay warm this morning?

But then Jesus lowers the boom. His four beatitudes are paralleled by four woes leveled against the rich, the full, the happy, and the well-thought-of.

The juxtaposition with those to be blessed with those who, although they may be blessed now will fall on hard times for eternity – is like one of those driver’s ed. films they used to show as the camera moves slowly over the twisted steel and mashed fenders.

Luke wants to get our attention, wake us up from our accommodation to business as usual, to cultural norms and policies that leave more people out and permit self-preservation of the few at the expense of the many. The path to the good life is narrower if we look deeper than a deceiving 3.6% unemployment picture; we get a more realistic view when we consider the millions who are uninsured, without benefits, and working two and three jobs per person to pay the bills. The gap between rich and poor in this country has never been as great as it is now.

Maybe you're wondering if you don't belong to the crowd of folks being blessed and don't want to belong to the crowd of folks being cursed where do you belong?

Clearly, neither Luke nor Jesus are saying 'make sure to find your way to poverty, hunger, grief and exclusion so that you can then be blessed.' These beatitudes are promises to be fulfilled for people whose present circumstances are already anything but desirable.

Rather, those who do prosper under the present system, who may be quite satisfied with their good fortune, keeping their head down, even perhaps who give a little extra to the annual charity drive, these are the ones caught in the cross hairs of the gospel this morning.

I apologize. That's not a very reassuring message. But bear with me, Luke wants us to *turn around*. Right! you might be saying to yourself, 'yet it sure seems like Luke's Jesus favors the poor and outcast; and he appears in this passage to flat-out condemn good middleclass folks who pay their taxes, keep the grass cut, volunteer for good causes, and vote in most elections.'

Yes, but there is that last admonition: "I say to you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you; if someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well; if someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt either; give to those who ask and don't demand your things back from those who take them.

Then the clincher, the principle behind what he's talking about, put in a memorable little rule we can apply to any of the myriad circumstances that come up in the day in matters great and small – treat people the same way you want them to treat you.

Are we willing to hear? That business of turning the other cheek and giving the shirt off your back is like what my mentor used to call 'skinny dipping for the soul.'

It is risky, so why subject ourselves to what could be considered mistreatment, even abuse; what kind of messiah would ask his followers to do that?

Well, the one who set the example in every one of those behaviors and then was arrested by the authorities, condemned to die a criminal's death – and hung on a cross, that's who.

If ever we seemed to be at the end of the road as a society, living in a state of affairs, including the present impeachment proceedings that have turned into a completely partisan affair; if ever the old code of conduct that got us here has revealed its inability to create a society in which all people are valued and welcomed and affirmed – this is it!

Accommodating the status quo, doing what we please as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, fitting in rather than calling attention to ourselves, staying below the radar – those principles we can safely declare are bankrupt.

Jesus was telling the people of his day and he is telling you and me now that it will take something more radical, even subversive to get us out of this mess we are in and have each had a hand in making: a society where there are fewer and fewer economic winners and more and more economic losers; where our prisons are bursting at the seams; our streets filling up again with the homeless and the majority of a new generation is being raised with less hope and little real opportunity.

What would it take to turn that around? Simple. Jesus says, treat other people, *all other people*, the way you want to be treated – with compassion and generosity. Isn't that what we want? Kindness, sensitivity and a place at the table?

Sorry, I don't have any easy, concluding palliative statement today. But if we really have ears to hear, we are left with much to ponder: Are we ready to go as far as Jesus went to treat other people the way we want to be treated?

That's a tough question for either side of the political aisle right now; it's a tough question for any who have the right to vote and consider how we treat people on our southern border; and it's a hard to answer question for all of us who go back this morning to comfortable homes and warm beds.

That's sand in the gears alright! It could even bring our comfortable life style, daily routine, and settled notion of what our business is in this church to a screeching halt.

Mull it over. Be still and know that God is God. Ask for a sign.

You'll be overwhelmed with the opportunities to do what Jesus asks of us.

When we gather around this table in a minute and are surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses whose ranks have been expanded by the names we call out today and who dwell on the other shore and now see God 'face to face';

When we take the bread and wine, they will be cheering us on; hoping we connect the dots between how we want to be treated and how we treat others – not just in the daily exchange of pleasantries, but in the policies and practices of our government, our employers, and our institutions of education, healthcare and the arts.

That's where the rubber meets the road because those are the places where people get left out. Finding ways for more people to enjoy the abundance of the land, abundance they have helped generate, that's where we're called to turn around and live lives befitting followers of Jesus. Amen.