

Jeremiah 17:5-10 ~ Luke 6:17-26

*Jesus' Sermon on the Plain--Part 1: Blessed are... who?*

Feb 17, 2019 ~ 6<sup>th</sup> After Epiphany ~ Service of Healing & Wholeness

*Introduction to Gospel Text:*

You may recall that last week, Jesus shocked Simon Peter, along with Andrew, James and John with an amazing catch of fish and then called them to follow him. We are told that they left their sinking (and soon to be stinking) boats overflowing with the catch of their lives, and went off to a crazy new adventure, as Jesus had put it, "from now on you will be catching people." Of course, they didn't really know what they were getting into. Who was this Jesus who had such freakish powers to heal and preach, and also to fish, apparently? He kept surprising and amazing them, sometimes breaking rules like healing on the sabbath, eating and drinking when other religious leaders were fasting, and calling a tax collector, of all people, to be his disciple. And yet with all this strange behavior and rule breaking, at the same time he seemed to be fulfilling prophecies deep from the core of their tradition. What was it about him?

In Luke's gospel, he took some time calling his twelve disciples whom he also named apostles. Jesus completed his choosing of the twelve, after spending a night on the mountain in prayer. Now I've caught you up to the moment where our story begins today. Jesus has just chosen his twelve, the complete list in verses 14-16, beginning with "Simon, whom he named Peter" and ending with "Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor."

*Sermon:*

What is level about the playing field into which we are born? From our Apgar score assigned while we are still wet and taking our first breath of oxygen outside of our mother's womb—all the way to after we have drawn our last breath when our "net worth" is calculated at the distribution of our Last Will and Testament: we are rated, scored and ranked. Who's better? Who's worse? As a young cellist, growing up in the world of auditions and chair assignments, I was hyper aware of what chair I was in the orchestra. Of course, being first chair was the best. But being 3<sup>rd</sup> chair was way better than, God help you if you were tenth chair, or even worse last chair. What a loser. At summer music camp, each week we could challenge any player who sat in a higher chair in hopes that we could move up and take it from them. Of course, it's not only in music where ranking reigns supreme. Sports, school, business, medicine: our system of ranking is everywhere. Where two or more are gathered, there the ranking will begin, yes?

But then along comes Jesus. Who is also there, among us. The Jesus we see today through Luke's eyes, delivers a shocking message of reverse ranking. But this is not the first time we've heard or seen this from him. Especially in Luke, this message reverberates in almost every story in Jesus' life—from before he was born, in the pregnant Mary's Magnificat poem, "He has brought down the powerful, he has lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty," (Luke 1:52-

53) to his very last moments on this earth, when he welcomes the criminal who cries out to him, as they both hung there in agony, dying side-by-side on two crosses, with the words: “Truly I tell you, today you will be in Paradise with me,” (Luke 23:43). Yes: Jesus came to turn this world of ranking, upside down. Or perhaps, right side up, in God’s eyes. One healing shock to the system at a time.

Luke signals this shock to the system even with the setting of Jesus’ signature sermon. He sets it down—not on the mountain, but on the plain. Throughout scripture, and across the religious landscape beyond our Bible, mountains are usually where holy, mystical things happen. God speaks in profound ways from mountain tops, think Moses, or the mountain of Transfiguration. Matthew’s better-known version of these sayings are, yes, the “Sermon on the Mount.” Leave it to Luke to plunk us down on the plain. A level space just below the mountain.

In the Bible, level places were traditionally considered to be places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery and hunger. You know, where life gets messy. Like kitchens, emergency rooms, classrooms and conference rooms. That’s where Jesus meets us, heals us, teaches us, and sometimes shocks us with his topsy-turvy, “still, more excellent way.” The Jesus’ way, where the least of these are lifted up, the “most of these” are brought down to size. We see it, hear it, and hopefully feel it in our story today: Jesus touching those he could reach, yet healing ALL of them, then looking UP at those who are considered to be at the bottom, not only the last chair in the orchestra, but the ones without cellos or chairs, saying, “Blessed are YOU.”

Are you feeling blessed today? Feeling divine blessing can blossom in your heart in surprising ways. In fact, God’s blessing sometimes heals us by shocking our system. By reordering our way of ranking others and ourselves. We may not know what hit us. Like this sermon of Jesus: Lifting up the lowly, putting down the high and mighty, and telling us to leap for joy when we are rejected, and beware if all speak well of you. Is he saying that unfiltered praise is a bad thing? Blessed are...who?

Yes: God blesses us with the ability to look at our day, our world with a different eye. Perhaps one that looks for hope in and light in perspectives different than our own. Perhaps one that looks beyond the world’s system of ranking and regarding, dismissing and disregarding the poor as unimportant. Jesus did not create this core message of this preaching and life on earth in a vacuum. He was building on and lifting up the core of his Jewish tradition. What is Jesus teaching us here? Is the *other* side is where the light comes in? Perhaps this is what Jeremiah was trying to warn Judah about. God’s chosen people ruled by King Zedekiah at that time, had turned from God trying to form an alliance with Egypt, which became the final nail on the coffin that ended with the Babylonian invasion. Jeremiah tried to shock the system back to life, but it didn’t work.

Sometimes a shock from an unexpected source works. Sometimes it doesn’t. Come with me now into the perspective of a young medical intern, named Rachel

Naomi Remen, M.D. and listen to this story told in her words—one night when Jesus' leveling came in a heartbeat to this young medical intern. She wrote:

*At ten o'clock on a very quiet night in the emergency room a distraught father rushed through the doors carrying his unconscious infant son in his arms shouting for help. Within seconds the child was the center of an intensive team effort. At the time, I was an intern, and as three more senior and experienced resident physicians had been available to deal with this crisis, I was in the room mostly as a witness. Rapidly several bloods were drawn from the infant, IVs were placed in both his arms, and fluids were started. An EKG was connected, which showed a profound electrolyte imbalance and an irregular heartbeat. Based on the rapid downhill course and the history of severe diarrhea given by the parents to another member of the team, the infant was diagnosed as having life-threatening dehydration.*

*We had barely gotten all our monitors and IV lines in place when someone shouted that we were losing him, and all eyes swung to the EKG monitor. The baby was in ventricular tachycardia. In seconds, it became ventricular fibrillation, the most dangerous of the heart arrhythmias. Untreated, death occurs in minutes.*

*We had run out of time. The electrolytes and fluids pouring into the tiny veins would not be fast enough to reverse the chaotic electrical activity of the baby's heart. As one, the team turned to the pediatric defibrillator, two paddles attached to a machine capable of delivering an electric shock to the heart. It was our only hope of restoring a normal heartbeat.*

*The most senior resident stepped toward the table and placed the paddles, one behind the baby's back and the other almost completely covering the little chest. Holding the paddle handles he shouted "Back!" and everyone stepped away from the table to avoid being shocked. He pressed the button and delivered the first shock. We all looked toward the EKG monitor. It showed a total cardiac arrest. "Again," he said, and we all stepped back. Over the next few minutes, he shocked the baby four times without a response. The EKG was flat. The baby's heart had stopped.*

*He flung the paddles to the floor, and shouted out a curse with intense feeling. Quickly he ordered epinephrine injected directly through the chest into the baby's heart. There was still no response. He turned and nodded to the other two residents. "Time to talk to the parents," he told them, and without another word all three left the treatment room.*

*After the intensity of moments before, the room suddenly went very still. It was a room full of women, two nurses and myself. Silently we looked at the tiny body on the table. He was a beautiful little boy, perfect in every way. Something in me called out to him, much as you might call a child in from playing to dinner. He had been well just yesterday. Less than five minutes ago his heart had been beating. It seemed impossible*

*that he could not come back. I was too young a doctor and too inexperienced to know that after four attempts at defibrillation, no one comes back.*

*Without thinking, I stooped and picked up the paddles from the floor. “Just one more time,” I said to the nurses. Placing the paddles as I had seen the senior resident do, I waited for them to step back. And then I pressed the red button. As before, the tiny body lifted slightly from the table and fell back. In the silence that followed, I heard one of the nurses draw in her breath. “Look!” she whispered, and pointed to the EKG. The flat line was now the classic tracing of a normal heartbeat pulsing steadily across the screen. I let go of the paddles, picked up the baby in my arms, IV lines, EKG leads and all.*

*The relief in the room was indescribable. We crowded together all of us talking at once, and we all had tears in our eyes. Then the door opened. In the doorway stood a distraught woman. Just behind her was a man, his face white and drawn, holding her by the shoulders. Behind them both stood the senior resident. Dismayed, I realized that he must have just given the baby’s parents the bad news. Suddenly the baby began to cry. As the woman stumbled toward us, one of the nurses quickly took the IV bottles from their stand and carried them aloft. The other began to push the EKG machine. Halfway across the room we met her and put her son back into her arms<sup>i</sup>*

Perhaps there is something about your life, or about someone you love, or about the political situation our country is in, that feels like emotional or spiritual ventricular fibrillation. Out of rhythm, way out of rhythm and no clear path to recovery. Perhaps you, or someone you love, or this country we love, needs the shock of Jesus’ leveling, healing touch to put us back in rhythm, and back into God’s embrace. I believe Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were meant to shock the system back into God’s rhythm where the playing field is level. Blessed are you, blessed are we—when we pick up the paddles and do our part for Christ’s sake.

---

<sup>i</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *My Grandfather’s Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2000), 263-265.