

She did it again. If you were here back in February this passage may sound familiar. You may remember that Nancy read it then, too . . . in that same unsettling way. When I first heard her read those “woe to” statements of Jesus, it was as if I was hearing a passage I’ve heard at least a hundred times, read for the first time.

Indeed, when I first heard her read the passage, I was shaking in my black, leather winter dress boots. I remember thinking, “Boy am I glad I’m only preaching on the first part of the passage.” And yet, the *woe to's* have, since that time, even unto now when I have progressed from winter boots into the season of wearing dress pumps again, the *woe to's* have continued to ring in my heart and mind, I can’t shake them, mainly because of the uncompromising way in which Nancy read them.

In seminary we were taught to read scripture like we could feel it from our head down to the tips of our toes. The flesh that Nancy’s intonation and phrasing puts on the bones of those words of warning does just that. Thank you, Nancy. Your knowledge of scripture is a treasure and your willingness to share it with all of us is a blessing. You are appreciated.

And while Nancy, and indeed all of you, are appreciated, it could be that this passage of scripture is not appreciated—at least not by those living lives of relative privilege. It can cause us to wonder why Jesus is being so mean. It calls into question what the so-called Prince of Peace is trying to communicate with such harsh words—words that don’t sync with many of our sensibilities about “Jesus our brother, kind and good.” Who is this aggressive Jesus of the *Woe To's* and what are we to do with him?

To get a sense of that, let’s return to that large, open plain in Israel where Jesus first spoke the words. Part of the crowd that had gathered were a rag-tag group of the sick, blind, and lame—folks who had traveled long distances in the hopes that this Jesus of Nazareth could heal them. They had heard the stories of him making the lame to walk and the blind to see and they wanted healing for themselves. They are the folks to whom the first part of this passage, a portion of Luke’s gospel known as the Sermon on the Plain—and yes it parallels the better known Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew’s gospel—these down and out folks are the ones to whom the first part of the passage is likely directed.

Jesus offers the poor and weak words of reassurance and hope. In his statements they find healing that brings, as we talked about in mid-February, a state of blessedness. Their blessedness comes not from being poor—poverty is not a blessing. Poverty is the absence of justice and injustice is not a blessing nor is it what God tells us is the intention for creation.

Rather, the poor are blessed because they have been forced to realize that they have become unable to help themselves and thus they turn to God and are given an opportunity to experience God’s amazing grace. This is contrary to the experience of those with wealth, power, and assets who can often times delude themselves into thinking that they can actually save themselves and thus they live a life that is absent from the blessed assurance that comes from knowing the love and provision of God. They don’t know the blessedness and relief that comes from seeking guidance and comfort from a source outside of themselves.

In calling the suffering, the sick, and the sorrowing blessed, instead of calling the wealthy and influential blessed, Jesus is blowing the common conventions of the day OUT. OF. THE. WATER. He lifts up the very people that those who have wealth and influence oppress. “Jesus teachings [in the Sermon on the Plain] are scandalous because they overturn every conventional expectation. The scandal of his ministry was his association with outcasts, and it was on them that [Jesus] pronounced God’s blessing. Henceforth, God’s presence, advocacy, and redemptive work will be seen among the poor.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, Luke/John, pg. 143.

This was so contrary to what the pompous and self-important religious leaders of the day were teaching. Their teachings were corrupt interpretations of scripture designed to lead the suffering to believe that their suffering was punishment from God. It was something they deserved. Those in power used their influence to further victimize the victim by convincing themselves and others that God had ordained the suffering of sick and hungry people because of the sin of sick and hungry people. In doing so, the rich and powerful then exonerated themselves from the responsibility of helping those in need even though the Old Testament is more than explicit and repetitive in the command to help those in need.

And not only did these religious leaders sorely misinterpret the laws of Moses, they then tried to suggest that they themselves had wealth and influence because God had blessed them because they were special. And that is balderdash. The corrupt religious officials had power because they were exchanging political favors with the occupying Roman forces. The corrupt had wealth because they created and maintained oppressive economic monopolies that made the poor, poorer and the rich, richer. When those leaders suggested their wealth and influence had ANYTHING to do with finding favor with God, they were taking the Lord's name in vain and so it was the Lord himself who came to call them to task.

And thus . . . Jesus of the *Woe To's*.

And here's where, in the story, I imagine Jesus straightens his spine, clears his throat, and looks beyond the "have nots" hovering near to him for safety and healing to the audience of the "haves" that had amassed on the outskirts—those who had come to gather evidence against Jesus and try to catch him up with their leading questions. Those who were, in so many ways, responsible for the suffering of the ones who had come for help and healing. And to them Jesus says,

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

Woe to you who are well fed now; for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets."

These four woes "drive home the message of the four beatitudes that preceded them by following them in sequence and stating the inverse.

Blessed are the poor . . . Woe to the rich.

Blessed are the hungry . . . Woe to the well fed.

Blessed are you who weep . . . Woe to you who laugh now.

Blessed are you when people hate you . . . Woe to you when all speak well of you.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus repeatedly sets up expectations about the Kingdom of God. Many of those expectations have to do with a reversal of fortune, best summarized as "some who are last shall be first and some who are first shall be last." (Lk. 13:30)

In the Sermon on the Plain, "Jesus confronts his disciples with a simple choice about who they identify themselves with in solidarity: those who are comfortable with their excesses garnered from the degradation of others, or those who are themselves degraded, vulnerable, and marginalized by their society."<sup>2</sup> In other words, will they take the side of those who are first or those who are last? Jesus suggests they should do the latter in—that true discipleship is about taking the side of the oppressed because, according to theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, "God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally

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<sup>2</sup> [Hereticalrhetoric.wordpress.com/tag/sermon-on-the-mount-vs-sermon-on-the-plain](http://Hereticalrhetoric.wordpress.com/tag/sermon-on-the-mount-vs-sermon-on-the-plain)

or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will . . .”<sup>3</sup>

The Sermon on the Plain can be a jagged little pill to swallow for those of relative wealth and privilege. But, it need not be a call to despair. Rather, as one commentator suggests “Our first response [to these statements of woe], therefore, needs to be repentance and a reordering of the priorities we have set for our lives.”<sup>4</sup>

Lent is a season for the reordering of priorities. This reordering of priorities to take the side of the poor brings to mind one of the qualities of spiritual maturity noted on the 10 Marks of Christian Maturity handout that was distributed on the first Sunday of Lent to begin our focus on the theme of spiritual maturity during this holy season of repentance. If you don't have a copy of the reading yet, please take one from the back on your way out of the church this morning. Many folks have shared with me how helpful they have found the information.

The eighth mark of Christian maturity noted on that handout is directly related to the Sermon on the Plain—the heart of the spiritually mature breaks for the poor and marginalized. As it explains . . .

“Jesus loved everyone. But Jesus had a special love for the marginalized. Maybe more than any other mark, this mark forms the dividing wall between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus loved those without a voice. The poor. The sick. The helpless. The Pharisees only loved those who could help them.

Mature Christians understand this distinction. Their hearts genuinely break for those in the world who don't have a voice. Their hearts hurt for the poor. They can't stand to see kids at school get picked on. They can't stand to think about boys and girls without parents. This is the heart of Christ. And it is the heart of mature Christians.

Mature Christians love those without a voice because they are close to God, and God is close to those without a voice.”

And that is the good news for the blessed be's and the woe to's—God is close. Always near at hand. The choice to repent and turn towards the God that is close at hand is ours—no matter who we are or what we've done or what we've left undone. God is near, just waiting for us to turn and come closer. God is near. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez in “Song and Deliverance” from *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, pg. 131.

<sup>4</sup> *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, Luke/John, pg. 145.