

**The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany: Luke 6.17-26****February 17, 2019****The Rev. Scott Walters**

It seems to me that there are two kinds of advice columns. The traditional model is very top down. A bona fide expert will weigh in about a noise in your transmission, or how to remove a stain from a sofa, or address an envelope to an Orthodox bishop, or even what to do when one's in-laws won't stop gifting you with tacky handmade crafts. We are devoted readers because we believe Click & Clack, or Heloise, or Emily Post, or Prudence knows best, if not all.

But there's also a bottom up kind of column. Some of them were wiki before wiki was a thing. Crowd sourced wisdom before crowds could gather on the internet.

My favorite was the "Tips & Techniques" section in Fine Homebuilding magazine. This column did not deliver a ruling from on high. Readers — who were mostly ordinary carpenters and other tradespeople, in this case — readers would share some little trick or jig that solved a problem for them. If your idea was among the very best ones of the month, there would even be a little line drawing to accompany it. I'm not sure I'd be prouder of having an essay published in the Paris Review than I'd be of having a jig I thought up appear in "Tips & Techniques."

In "Tips & Techniques" you might learn that electrical wire cutoffs make great trash bag ties or that a drinking straw can keep your toilet flapper chain from getting hung up. I started reading the magazine as an apprentice on a house framing crew (i.e. the guy who mostly carried things to people who actually knew what to do with them). So, even if you've never been asked to carry anything large and unwieldy up a ladder, you can probably appreciate the life changing insight that a C-clamp cinched down on one end makes a perfect little handle for a 4X8 sheet of plywood.

But to me, whether the expertise comes from a single guru or from the masses, what's most wonderful about advice columns is the fellowship of readers. We return, week after week, month after month, not just for the wisdom itself, but to find that someone else has encountered the same everyday problems we have. Lots of someones, in fact.

In reading, we learn not only how to remove an ink stain from a favorite shirt, but that lots of people in this world forget to retract their pens before putting them in their pockets. In reading, we maybe feel a little less alone. In reading, we find ourselves part of a great fellowship of muddlers through. People trying to figure this life out, one stuck wing nut at a time.

Initially, Jesus' words in today's gospel probably don't strike us as terribly helpful with regard to creating fellowship. In fact they seem to emphasize and even celebrate some of the most persistent divisions among people. "Blessed are you who are poor...woe to you who are rich." "Blessed are you who are hungry...Woe to you who are full." "Blessed are you who weep...Woe to you who are laughing." We might think that the gist of his teaching is "Make sure you're poor, hungry, and weeping." And what's more, you're even better off if you're hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. How's that for a little good news?

But something more is going on here than a careful sorting of the kinds of folks God likes from the kind of folks God can't abide. And I think that to understand this famous list of blessings and woes we need to look to what just precedes and follows it in Luke's gospel.

At the beginning of what we read this morning we hear that Jesus came down and stood on a level 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. And we're told that "all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them."

It seems important to place these startling phrases of Jesus within the context of this healing. It seems important to remember that these words are spoken by one whose very presence heals. One from whom a power goes out and attracts crowds of all kinds of people, from all kinds of places, and makes them well.

So it would seem very strange if Jesus suddenly turned to the people he had just healed and set them at odds – rich against poor, hungry against full, sad against happy.

And listen to what follows the blessings and the woes in Luke: "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you..."

Peaceableness towards enemies lies at the heart of the reconciliation to which Jesus called his followers. The work of redemption God was up to in Christ was not about breaking the world apart into smaller and smaller pieces. It was about reconciling a divided humanity to God and to one another.

When we place the beatitudes within this larger mission, we realize that Jesus probably wasn't trying to sharpen divisions that had grown blurry. He was trying to reverse and break down divisions that had existed for a long, long time.

Jesus's world, like ours, was already quite nicely divided between the blessed and the cursed. But Jesus turned even these essential divisions around. And a new possibility for fellowship emerged.

He said that appearances can be deceiving. Because the human assumption has long been that blessedness is always and everywhere marked by wealth, and fullness, and laughter. But Jesus says, "Woe to all that. There is a blessedness that you do not understand. See these hated ones, these excluded ones, these weeping ones? They are blessed. God counts them as righteous. There is a blessedness that you do not understand."

And what's more, if you understand your own blessedness to be evinced most clearly by your wealth or your full stomach, or even by your happiness, well, you've missed the good news for yourself. Jesus shatters our ideas of what we thought blessedness looks like. Shatters them to the point of saying, "You don't even have to feel blessed. But before God, you are."

Flannery O'Connor once wrote in a letter, "The thought of everybody lolling about in an emotionally satisfying faith is repugnant to me." Sentimentality was not chief among Ms. O'Connor's faults. But when Jesus says, "Blessed are you who mourn" he, too, relieves us of the notion that faith is mainly about our emotional satisfaction. Which is pretty unsettling at first blush. Why be Christian if it isn't guaranteed to make me feel better?

But imagine what kind of reconciliation and fellowship might possible if we really believed what Jesus said. Imagine rich and poor each believing that the other's blessedness did not depend upon the

externals of their lives, but upon the grace of God. Imagine how we might live together if we really believed that whether we feel like weeping or laughing, this has not a thing to do with the deep blessedness of every last one of us before God.

If we don't hear this good news first, then Jesus's commands to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who abuse us... then these commands are nothing but a new set of burdens to take on. But if we all share an essential blessedness, regardless of our different states and stations in life, treating my enemy as though he were blessed is just acting as though the world really is put together like Jesus said it was. Blessing those who curse us bears witness to the fact that God's has never blessed only who we think deserves to be blessed. God's blessing depends only upon God.

Jesus told of a blessedness that is ours already. He said that you cannot be too poor, too hungry, too hated, too excluded or defamed to be rid of it. He said you don't even have to feel it.

So here's a suggestion. What if we stopped reading the beatitudes as a stark list of incompatible categories and started reading them as something more like that Tips & Techniques section. Teachings for a kind of fellowship of the muddlers through in which we are very much included and therefore a little less alone in our muddling.

But what if we read Jesus' words, and whether we're rich or poor, whether we're hungry or fed, yes, even if we're happy or feel like our life is collapsing around us, what if we began to believe in a fellowship far deeper than circumstance.

Because Jesus' words don't just connect us to a few oddballs who share our quirky affection for something. These words move us gradually from ourselves, outward to those around us who share our state, and all the way out to strangers and enemies and the most desperate sorts of lives we encounter. Rather than dividing us up, Jesus tells the good news that we share in a fellowship of blessedness with every other one of God's children. If we could help one another rest a little more fully in this fact, imagine who else we might learn to welcome into our lives. And imagine how, in such a fellowship, the poor and hungry and weeping parts of our own souls, the excluded and reviled parts of our selves might also find a welcome here. And maybe begin to be healed as well. Amen.