

Focus: The Good News is there is certitude in faith as we travel the path of life.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning, we hear the Lucan version of the Beatitudes. Luke would have been pretty popular in many churches today. He presents in a mere thirty verses the same sermon which takes Matthew over one hundred to recount.

But there are also some significant differences in the two versions of the sermon that cannot go unnoticed. Some of the differences are rather obvious.

For Matthew, this sermon takes place with Jesus standing on a hill, thus giving it the common name “the Sermon on the Mount.” Luke, on the other hand, has Jesus standing on a flat area as he comes down from a hilltop, so we often call this version the “Sermon on the Plain.”

More significant is the difference in the general tone of the two. Matthew spiritualizes much of the sermon, especially the Beatitudes, while Luke addresses the “disciples” in their real place in life. We hear Jesus tell the disciples things about their station in life—their *Sitz im Leben*, as theologians might say—and what they might expect from those stations.

It’s a pretty tough message that Jesus is proclaiming.
If one is poor, hungry, crying, or hated, then one is blessed?
This sure doesn’t sound like a blessing, does it?
And woe to those who are rich, well-fed, laughing, and liked?
I thought that was what we were *supposed* to be aiming for—the good old American dream.
Isn’t it supposed to be a blessing to be successful?

We have some interesting words here—especially as we dig into the Gospel text a little deeper. In Greek, the word we translate into English as “blessed” or “happy” is the word *makarios*.

We often say we are “happy to be here”
or “happy to help,” but *makarios* has a stronger meaning.
To speak of *makarios* is to speak of a deep, inner happiness,
a happiness that lives and grows from within a person.
“Profound happiness” one might call it.
Beatitudes are found not only in the New Testament,
but also in secular Greek literature.
It was a style of writing in ancient Greece
that Greek writers generally used when talking about the Greek gods,
and not about mortal beings.
To the Greeks, to be “profoundly happy or blessed”
was something only the gods could be.
Mortals could be blessed by the gods,
but that was a completely different situation.

However, in the Hebrew tradition—
from which, of course, Jesus
and virtually all those who followed him came—
they didn’t talk of God being “profoundly blessed,”
but the people were blessed.
So you see, in the Sermon on the Plain,
the people heard a style of preaching
with which they were familiar,
but not necessarily were the thoughts and ideas presented familiar.

In the Gospel text this morning,
we don’t hear practical wisdom or cute sayings from Jesus.
Instead, we hear a paradox in each beatitude.
“Blessed—profoundly happy—are those who are *poor*” we are told,
for they will, in some time to come, receive the kingdom of God.
“Woe to the rich, for they have gotten all they are going to get.”
In each pair of “blessed” and “woe,”
Jesus is turning the expectations of the disciples on its head.
What are we to make of this?
How are we to respond in our own lives here in the 21st century?

My friends, this is the question that many of you
have probably asked yourselves, each other, and your pastors.
Bookstores, magazine racks, web sites, and television schedules
are filled with material to read, hear, or watch
to help give you “spiritual direction.”

We have developed an entire ministry in society filled with men and women—clergy and laity—who serve as “spiritual directors,” available to listen, pray, and guide a person on a personal quest to determine what God wants from the person. It seems many of us today are seeking out *makarios*, but we’re not certain what it really is and where to really look for it.

I wish I could offer you a simple roadmap or to-do list that would guide you to that profound happiness. If only it were that easy. Even Jesus couldn’t give a simple way to find it, as we see in the example of the rich young man who asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The young man *knew* the commandments, the Law, the psalms, everything there was to know about worship. He had all the *information* he could get. But what he lacked was *certitude*—a guarantee that what he was doing was correct and would ensure he was on the right track. Moreover, he wanted to know he was on the right path before he stepped out on the journey.

So then, if there is no particular path to follow, does it matter at all what we do? By no means, my dear friends! It matters greatly what we do, and how we go about it. Listen again to the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. . . . Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord.”¹ For those who don’t trust the Lord, life is pretty tough—like being a shrub in the desert. Those desert plants are frequently affected negatively by drought, too. However, those who trust in the Lord

¹ Jer. 15:5, 7.

are like trees planted along a stream or lake—
always having their roots fed by nourishing water.
The waterside plants are always lush and green.

The analogy between people and plants works well in other ways, too.
Just as the plant in the desert is challenged by the conditions,
so to are you and I when we place all of our trust
in ourselves and our own devices.

When we think we can control everything,
we often find that the rains don't come when we expect them,
or that the heat from the sun beats down longer than we had hoped.
If our heart is in the wrong place,
the rest of our body will follow.
But when we place our trust in the Lord,
and look to Jesus as our light,
our heart is in the right place.

As baptized children of God,
our roots are always in the water,
being nourished and protected from a spiritual drought.
The Light of the World—
Jesus Christ—is a lamp to our feet, and illuminates the path for us.
But, just as a flashlight in the woods
doesn't illuminate the entire path for us,
it is also true that Christ doesn't fully illuminate the path
from beginning to end.
Oh, we know that we are born, grow up,
and at some time to come, die.
But, what will happen along the way,
and when things will happen are still unknown to us.

But in the midst of that uncertainty,
we still go down the path,
led by the light of Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit.
That's why we call it a journey of *faith*
and not a journey of *certitude*.
The disciples of Jesus didn't know
where they would end up when they decided to follow Jesus.
But, they followed anyway.
Through the centuries, Christians have followed as well
on a journey of faith—

supported with the Scriptures, prayer, creeds,
confessions, and much more.
The path is lit, but we're not quite certain
where the path will exactly lead us.
We may not know God's will for us for the long haul,
but we embark on the way in faith.

In her book,
The Rising: Living the Mysteries of Lent, Easter, and Pentecost,
Wendy Wright says this about God's will:
"If you think you sense the will of God in your life
in some long-range, highly detailed plan,
something you can see stretching out with clear goal
and successes into the future,
that is not the will of God.
If, however, you have an insistent sense
that the next, very hesitant step beyond which you can see nothing
is in fact that must be taken,
that is most likely the will of God for you."²

Wendy Wright is on to something here.
It's what Jeremiah, and the psalmist,
and Jesus are trying to say to us in the lessons this morning.
Ours is a life of faith, not certitude.
We place our trust in God, knowing that in our baptism
God chooses us to be his.
We walk in faith each day,
knowing the direction in which we are heading,
and seeking to discern the will of God
as we come to forks in the path along the way.
We pray as we did in the Prayer of the Day,
that God will receive our prayers,
help us to see *and* understand that which we are to do,
and give us the grace and power to do what we need to do.

We don't have certitude in the details, but faith.
But, my sisters and brothers,
we do have some certitude as we travel the road.
As we travel, we have the certitude of God's grace.

² Wright, 35.

We have the certitude of the death and resurrection
of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.
We have the certitude of the presence of the Holy Spirit with us
as we travel the path before us.

How much more certain can we be? Amen.