

Blessings and Woes

The scripture we just heard and sang and heard again and will hear at least one more time – known as the sermon on the plain – is a less familiar version of Jesus’ very famous sermon on the mount found in the Gospel of Matthew.¹

Let’s read Luke’s description of what happened right before Jesus’ sermon on the plain.²

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

He came down with them 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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Luke continues to emphasize that Jesus’ ministry is in the power of God’s Spirit. Before he delivers the sermon on the plain, Jesus is on the mountain, praying. Prayer guides him as he chooses his closest companions and goes to speak to the masses of people waiting for him. Power comes out of him as he heals and restores those who have come to him for help. Then he teaches them what it means to follow him, to truly follow the way of God.

Unlike Matthew’s nine blessings and no woes,³ Luke lists four of each.⁴ All four beatitudes bless the deprived: the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those despised and rejected. The four woes are pronounced on those whose lives are the opposite of the blessed: the rich, the full, the laughing, and the socially accepted.

This is good news for Jesus’ disciples. They’ve left everything to follow him. They sometimes hunger and mourn. They will be hated and reviled. In fact, people are already attacking their characters and criticizing their actions. Jesus says they will be happy; they are blessed. In fact, the reign of God belongs to people such as these.

Although the blessings Jesus promises will be fully realized in the future, they can be experienced in part in the present. Jesus inaugurates a new reality in which God turns everything upside down by filling the hungry, overturning the powerful, and bringing good news to the poor. This is what he read to the people in the synagogue in Nazareth. This is what his mother Mary sang about after her cousin Elizabeth confirmed what the angel Gabriel had told her about the child she was carrying in her womb.

God’s good news to the poor is also tough news for those who are not poor. For God’s reign to be good news for the well-fed, rich, laughing, and admired, they will have to wake up and change their ways.

This doesn’t mean that it’s better to be poor, hungry, and the like than to be rich, well-fed, and the like. God doesn’t love only those who are miserable. Jesus’ words are promises to those who are suffering in this world. God still sees them, loves them, and is intent on their thriving. Jesus’ words are also warning calls

¹ Parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 10 of “Meet Jesus, the Messiah” from Shine, [Shine - Menno Media](#); Commentary on Luke 6:17-26 by Sarah Henrick, [Commentary on Luke 6:17-26 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); Commentary on Luke 6:27-38 by Sarah Henrick, [Commentary on Luke 6:27-38 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); and Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 102-103, 108-109.

² Luke 6:12-19, NRSV

³ Matthew 5:3-12

⁴ Luke 6:20-26

to those who live in comfort and ease. God challenges them to live with attention and generosity toward their neighbors, even as God is attentive and generous.

The “wealth gap,” “food deserts,” the “education gap,” the “health gap,” and myriad other gaps and failures around the globe mark the two sides of the blessings and woes. It’s the gap we are called to address by this passage for God’s sake and our own. It’s what children of God do and what they repent of not having done, confident that God gives new opportunities to live with generosity and attention.

In the next section of the sermon, Jesus teaches his disciples about two issues raised in the blessings and woes: persecution and material possessions. He tells them that strict reciprocity shouldn’t be the guiding principle of their relationships. In the first-century Mediterranean world, social relationships were governed by a careful balancing of benefits and obligations, often between unequal parties. Those with more wealth and status granted favors to those with less, thus obligating them to reciprocate with gratitude and service. Jesus’ instructions to his disciples set forth an alternative way of relating to people.

He begins with a general command to *keep loving your enemies no matter what they do to you*. He follows with three statements that explain the meaning of the command. *Keep doing good to those who hate you. Keep speaking blessings on those who curse you. Keep praying for those who mistreat you.*⁵ These three statements show that loving one’s enemies is not primarily about how one feels towards them; rather, it means responding to harmful acts with service and goodwill.

Jesus goes on to give concrete examples of what such alternative behavior can look like. *If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other cheek too. If someone steals your coat, offer [them] your shirt too. If someone begs from you, give to [them]. If someone robs you of your valuables, don’t demand them back. Think of the kindness you wish others would show you; do the same for them.*⁶

Jesus challenges his followers to respond to mistreatment with positive, nonviolent action and to the loss of possessions with generosity. These examples are not a command to do nothing in the face of hostility. Rather, they’re provocative behaviors intended to stop aggressors in their tracks and prompt them to take another look at their behavior. Jesus’ radical examples go counter to human instincts to protect ourselves and our possessions. Instead, Jesus urges disciples to be non-defensive and open, thereby catching the aggressor off guard.

In the verses that follow, Jesus provides the motivation for such radical reciprocity. *Listen, what’s the big deal if you love people who already love you? Even scoundrels do that much! So what if you do good to those who do good to you? Even scoundrels do that much! So what if you lend to people who are likely to repay you? Even scoundrels lend to scoundrels if they think they’ll be fully repaid.*

*If you want to be extraordinary—love your enemies! Do good without restraint! Lend with abandon! Don’t expect anything in return! Then you’ll receive the truly great reward—you will be children of the Most High—for God is kind to the ungrateful and those who are wicked. So imitate God and be truly compassionate, the way your Father is.*⁷

Disciples love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, and are extravagant in their generosity—not because such behavior always works to make everything come out right—but because this is the character of God. By imitating God’s extravagant mercy and generosity, followers of Jesus show themselves to be children of God.

As usual I began working on this sermon early in the week, reading the scripture in several translations and collecting notes on it from various sources. As usual, after working on it for a while, I decided to set it aside and do something else. More accurately, I decided to procrastinate. I didn’t want to research. I didn’t want to write. I didn’t want to think about it.

What could I do that was at least church related? I can check email. One of the first ones I read was from César García, Mennonite World Conference general secretary.⁸ He related the story of Dirk Willems, a

⁵ Luke 6:27-28, *The Voice*

⁶ Luke 6:29-31, *The Voice*

⁷ Luke 6:32-36, *The Voice*

⁸ [Mennonite World Conference | \(mwc-cmm.org\)](http://mwc-cmm.org)

16th century Dutch Anabaptist. Dirk escaped from prison where he was being held because of his faith. When his pursuer fell through the ice of the lake they were running across, Dirk turned to pull him out of the icy water. Dirk was then re-arrested and executed.

After telling the story, César Garcia asked a few questions. *What if the world were full of people like Dirk Willems? What if we saw Jesus in the face of our enemies? How could we be a global church whose spiritual cornerstone is mutual love among Christians, even to the point of giving up one's own life? How could we experience that love in our families, workplaces and neighborhoods?*

Sounds like the teachings of Jesus in the sermon on the plain to me!

The next email I read was part of a self-guided course on conflict without casualties from Nate Regier, CEO of a communication training firm.⁹ I signed up for this course after participating in a webinar offered by MC USA on how to have difficult conversations with compassionate accountability.¹⁰

Nate Regier wrote: *I grew up the son of Mennonite missionary parents. The early messages I received growing up were, "Turn the other cheek," or "Find another way to solve your problem without resorting to violence." My parents dedicated their lives to building more peaceful and compassionate relationships. I respect and admire them immensely. And I've always struggled to reconcile this philosophy with reality.*

Along the way I've discovered several myths about conflict that get in the way of using it productively. Here's the first one...Peace is the absence of conflict.

Don't confuse peace with tranquility. Don't confuse lack of shouting with the absence of conflict. I've experienced many families, churches, and organizations who claim to be peaceful just because they don't raise their voices and they "agree to disagree." Yet the amount of violence in these communities rivals a war zone. Passive-aggressive gossip, manipulation, avoidance, withholding information, bullying and power plays are the rules of the game.

Peace is an active, dynamic, and generative process that requires healthy conflict. If peace means we are getting along, cooperating, and not hurting each other, then we can't get there without addressing our differences and disagreements. Diversity was built into the universe from the beginning. Embracing and working with it is the only way towards peace, and this requires conflict.

As a life-long Mennonite who grew up in a family where conflict was avoided, this hit close to home. How do we imitate God's extravagant mercy and generosity while acknowledging and addressing our differences and disagreements in healthy ways? It seems that this is the intended result of Jesus' teachings in the sermon on the plain.

Checking email wasn't giving me the desired distance from sermon writing, so I decided to read the latest edition of *Anabaptist World* magazine.¹¹ But the cover story was about MJ Sharp, who did peacemaking work first as part of Mennonite Mission Network, then Mennonite Central Committee, and then the United Nations.

In an MCC publication in the fall of 2013, MJ put his work into context: *"Places of intense conflict are also places where creative solutions are born and put to the test. If Jesus' example is for everyone everywhere, what does that look like in eastern Congo, where war has been the norm for 20 years? I get to work on the front line of Congolese ingenuity and faithfulness in response to violence and hardship."*

MJ sat with militia commanders to discuss conflict over cups of tea, part of a program that persuaded roughly 1,600 fighters to lay down their weapons. Five years ago, MJ and his colleague Zaida Catalán were murdered while investigating atrocities in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The murders were a well-planned conspiracy because MJ and Zaida were a threat to the corrupt government in power at that time.

After reading several articles about MJ Sharp, I moved on to the columnists. Surely this would help me avoid thinking about blessings and woes, loving enemies, and behaving as God's children. But Sarah Kehrberg wrote about the golden rule – part of both the sermon on the plain and on the mount¹² – in an essay

⁹ [Compassionate Communication Training for Executives | Next Element \(next-element.com\)](https://www.next-element.com/compassionate-communication-training-for-executives)

¹⁰ [Delegate Resources: Special Session May 2022 | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](https://www.mennoniteusa.org/delegate-resources-special-session-may-2022)

¹¹ [January 21 2022 Issue Archives | Page 3 of 4 | Anabaptist World](https://www.anabaptistworld.org/january-21-2022-issue-archives)

¹² Luke 6:31, Matthew 7:12

titled “Extra shirt and bicycles.”¹³ And Jerrell Williams wrote about using nonviolent civil disobedience to address the principalities and powers that sustain white supremacy in an essay titled “Hate is easy. Love is hard.”¹⁴

I should have known that reading a Mennonite magazine wouldn’t allow me to escape the words of Jesus. I opened my laptop, found the NPR website, and began exploring segments that aired on Morning Edition during the previous few days. An interview of Francis Collins, former director of the National Institutes of Health caught my attention.¹⁵ The host, Rachel Martin, began by stating, “After two years helping lead America’s fight against COVID-19, Dr. Francis Collins is diagnosing a different kind of public health crisis.”

According to Collins, *“The culture wars are literally killing people - because we’ve lost that sense of what our greatest calling is, which is the truth, goodness and beauty - those three transcendentals that are supposed to characterize us - all three of which seem to be frayed.”*

Dr. Collins is a scientist and an evangelical Christian. For him, it’s heartbreaking to see the ways in which the divide between science and faith has hit his community of faith particularly hard. When asked what the pandemic has revealed about not just who we are as a society, but assumptions about our collective desire to look out for one another, Collins replied, *“To put it mildly, this is the golden rule. And the golden rule now - maybe it still applies to people that are in your own social grouping, your tribe. But it sure doesn’t apply to the people on the other side where we are now so quick not just to say they’re misguided, but to say they’re evil; they’re dangerous. It’s particularly florid right now. And I guess COVID has made it clear that that’s not just an unfortunate kind of a new chapter in the culture wars.”*

When asked where he found hope, Collins said, *“My faith is a deep source of that. I also have hope that human nature, despite all of its foibles, is basically put together in a way that over time we find a way to do the right thing, even after making a lot of mistakes along the way. In addition to what I’m doing now with my research lab, which is a hope for finding answers to diabetes and aging, I’m also seriously thinking about whether there’re ways that I might be able to use whatever credibility I have to try to make a case for bringing us out of this set of warring factions towards something with more concern for each other. Do I have much of a chance in making a difference? I don’t know. But I’m hopeful that maybe I could in some small way.”*

After hearing these words from Dr. Collins, I gave up. I couldn’t avoid hearing about the golden rule and living out Jesus’ words from the sermon on the plain while sitting in my office and procrastinating. I went home and escaped to YouTube where I watched a video featuring a lawyer who likes to use the “cursey” words. Even she pointed out how a person can have civil, friendly, interactions with someone whose opinions are the complete opposite of yours.

Perhaps I’ve strayed too far from today’s Bible story. But, perhaps, these emails, articles, and interviews demonstrate how true, relevant and wise the teachings of Jesus have been across the ages. Part of our mission as individuals and as a faith community is to live with attention and generosity toward our neighbors; to address the gaps that exist between us; to respond to mistreatment with positive, nonviolent action; and to know that no matter a person’s station in life – rich or poor, hungry or full, mournful or joyful, rejected or respected, powerful or powerless – God still sees them, loves them, and is intent on their thriving. May God help us to see ourselves, each other, and our neighbors both near and far in this same way. Amen.

¹³ [Extra shirt and bicycles | Anabaptist World](#)

¹⁴ [Hate is easy. Love is hard. | Anabaptist World](#)

¹⁵ [Next chapter: Ex-NIH head Francis Collins works to bridge the country's divides : NPR](#)