

Living in the Middle

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Luke 6:17-26

After he had spent a night on a mountain in prayer, Jesus called his disciples to him, and he chose twelve of them to be apostles.

[Jesus] came down [from the mountain] with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples and lots of people from all over Judea and Jerusalem and from Tyre and Sidon along the sea came to listen to him and to be healed of their diseases. People troubled by unclean spirits were restored. And everyone in the crowd tried to touch him, because power was coming out of him and healing everyone. Then he looked at his disciples and said,

The poor are fortunate,
because the kingdom of God is yours.
People who are hungry now are fortunate,
because you will be satisfied.
People who weep now are fortunate,
because you will laugh.
You are fortunate when people hate you
and when they shun you,
insult you,
and give you a bad name
for the sake of the son of man.
Jump for joy on that day;
you have a great reward in heaven,
because their fathers treated the prophets the same way.

But how hard it will be for you who are rich,
because you've already been paid your full consolation.
How hard it will be for you who are full now,
because you will be hungry.
How hard it will be for people who laugh now,
because you will mourn and weep.
How hard it will be when everyone speaks well of you,
because their fathers treated the false prophets the same way.

Children's Story

Goldilocks knew what she did not like. She did not like porridge that was too hot, and she did not like porridge that was too cold. She did not like chairs that were too big, and she did not like chairs that were too small. She did not like beds that were too hard, and she did not like beds that were too soft.

Goldilocks knew what she did not like. She did not like things that were too much one way or too much the other way. Instead she liked things that were somewhere in the middle. For Goldilocks "somewhere in the middle" was just right.

But sometimes “somewhere in the middle” doesn’t work. Sometimes you have to decide one way or the other.

- ▶ You play inside or you play outside, not with one foot indoors and one foot out.
- ▶ You go to school in the morning or you don’t; you don’t stand on the sidewalk out front just looking at the school building.

Goldilocks may have turned it into an art, but sometimes “somewhere in the middle” doesn’t work.

Sermon

Sometimes I don’t know what to preach. I hope and pray for inspiration, for direction, for a plan. But the Spirit doesn’t always oblige, and I’m left pulling my hair out. Recently I decided to preach on the Beatitudes. Last Sunday’s sermon was the introduction to those sermons. You may recall that I proposed a different slant on the Sermon on the Mount, which is where the Beatitudes are found in Matthew’s gospel. I proposed last week that we understand the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus’s message to Israel, a message that we need to transpose into a different key, then take to the world.

So I planned to preach on the Beatitudes from Matthew. But then I decided to preach on Luke’s version of the Beatitudes. In Luke the Beatitudes are given in a different location (a “level place” rather than on a “hillside”) and on a different occasion (after Jesus had appointed his twelve apostles). Also, in Luke the Beatitudes are paired with their opposites; the section in Luke is often called “Blessings and Woes.” And in Luke it’s not the “poor in spirit” who are fortunate, it’s the “poor.” This seemed like a perfect fit for a sermon to be preached the day before tomorrow night’s BREAD assembly. So I planned to preach on “poor” vs “rich.”

It seemed pretty straightforward. Jesus said, “The poor are fortunate . . . , but how hard it will be for you who are rich.” I’ve been encouraged over the years to see this contrast in one way, as an issue of economics and social justice. The “poor” are the exploited and helpless. They start the race three laps behind, and there are very few come-from-behind victories — unlike Street Sense’s win in the Kentucky Derby yesterday. The “rich,” on the other hand, are the powerful and connected. They live off the labor of others.

The good news? Jesus is on the side of the poor. The poor, not the rich, get the kingdom. All of a sudden the poor will find themselves at the front of the line. The poor will get the best seats in the house. The poor will get an audience with the royal family as their right, not as an act of condescension. And the rich? They get to keep what they have, but they don’t get anything more. Like in the old Far Side cartoon, they live forever on Cloud Eight, knowing that people are having a much better time on the next cloud.

That’s how I heard Luke’s “Blessings and Woes” explained. It all seemed pretty straightforward.

But I wondered: What about those of us in the middle? We are not poor. By abstract measures we’re anything but poor. Our basic needs have been met. Our ends meet; they even overlap. We are not beggars. And by relative measures we’re better off than most people alive. We’re better off than most people who have ever lived. So, we’re not poor. But we’re not rich either. Sure, we’re rich compared to Third World garment workers scraping by on \$0.87 a day. But we are not rich, not really. Bill Gates is rich. We are the hired help.

So I wondered: What’s the good news for us? What blessing awaits those of us who live in the middle? And how will that compare to the hard time that awaits the rich? And how will that compare to the kingdom that awaits the poor? That’s what I wondered. And that’s what I figured I’d be preaching today.

Then I took a closer look at the text, and I realized I had it all wrong. Despite first appearances, the contrast in Luke 6 is not between rich and poor, hungry and full, laughing and weeping. It’s not about

taking economic measure of ourselves and others and then assigning eternal outcomes based on the present situation, with the future merely being the present turned inside out and upside down. That sort of thing is closer to Marxist revolution than it is to the Kingdom of God.

No, the contrast in Luke 6, the distinction, is not between rich and poor, hungry and full, laughing and weeping; it's between faithful and false prophets. The poor, hungry, and weeping in Luke 6 are not the mere victims of an economic losing streak. They are not people with the great misfortune of being born on the wrong side of the tracks or on the wrong continent. Rather they are people who are hated, shunned, insulted, and rejected because they belong to Jesus; people who live out their loyalty to Jesus and pay the price — even if it means poverty, hunger, or sorrow — because above all they are disciples of Jesus.

Then, on the other hand, there are those with full wallets, full bellies, and full social calendars. These are not merely people with silver money clips, golden palates, and platinum PDAs. These are not merely people who were born into multiple advantages that they've worked successfully their whole lives. These are not merely people with a network of fellow first-class travelers that dwarfs the crowd that follows every Verizon Wireless customer in those TV commercials. Rather they are people who make friends and influence people by a false gospel they peddle and live by — a gospel not about following Jesus whatever the consequences, not about food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, and visits for inmates in prison. Instead they peddle and live by a gospel about security, comfort, and power; a gospel especially suited for the right people who come from the right places. They peddle and live by a “gospel” that is no gospel at all. They are “prophets” who have no word from God.

That's the contrast in Luke 6 — it's between faithful disciples and the peddlers and followers of a false gospel — and it has lasting consequences. The rich can have their money, they can be full of their fine food, and they can be laughing at their proper parties. They can have it all, and they can keep it all. If that's what they want, that's what they'll get. But will all of that ever look pale, will all of that ever look sickly, in the light of God's Kingdom, the kingdom that awaits faithful disciples, who may have their share of trouble for now.

I gave this sermon its title, *Living in the Middle*, before I knew what it would be about. That happens! Now, living in the middle doesn't sound so bad when we're talking about the sliding scale between poverty and riches. In fact, that's exactly where the wisdom of the proverb says we ought to be: “Lord, give me neither poverty nor riches” (Pr. 30:8). In other words, “Let me live somewhere in the middle.” And, as Goldilocks knew, somewhere in the middle is “just right.” That's probably where most of us — actually that is certainly where all of us are, somewhere in the middle. And I would guess it's where we want to be.

But do we want to be somewhere in the middle when it comes to our loyalty to Jesus? We sure don't want to be false prophets, though we have been tempted more than once by false gospels. We sure don't want to be false prophets. But we're not sure we want to be prophets at all, are we? Especially if the consequences are unpleasant, or expensive. Perhaps we can give it a try, though, a tentative try, tomorrow night at the BREAD assembly, raising our voices, our prophetic voices, with others for the sake of justice.

Remember, Jesus wasn't nailed to the cross halfway. And he wasn't buried in the tomb halfway. Jesus didn't walk out of that tomb halfway. And he didn't ascend to the Father halfway. We're not going to try to follow him halfway, are we?