

Susan Gascho-Cooke
Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
February 17, 2019
Luke 6:17-26 <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=417633117>

What do we come to church for?

Today's scripture is *almost* one of the most well-known teachings of Jesus. The Beatitudes, you may say, and you're correct, in part. Today's scripture is a *lot* like the Sermon on the Mount, which Mennonites love to love. We get pretty upset when folks go all *literal* on the whole Old Testament, but we've historically been pretty holier- (or at least "more-literal-)-than-thou about the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is all the wonderful flesh on the bones of Jesus' *teachings*. That whole bit that gets lost in some of the creeds of the ancient church that only ask us to believe that Jesus was born, died and rose from the grave, but never ask us to believe that what he taught and lived was as important.

Today's scripture takes place after Jesus comes *down* from a mountain. It's known as the "Sermon on the Plain" and it's Luke's take many of the same teachings that Matthew attributed to a sermon "on the mount." Matthew's sermon goes on for three chapters, while Luke's doesn't even take up all of chapter 6. And while Luke both omitted some of the teachings Matthew included, presuming they drew from a similar cache of stories, he also added some words in that Matthew left out.

If these two versions of the Beatitudes were variations of chili, instead of variations of scripture, and if we gave them each a 90s-themed name (stealing from the creativity of Senior Youth chili dinner last night) you might say that Luke's version of the Beatitudes is the "Spice Girls" – or *spicy* chili, while Matthew's is the "Ice Ice Chili" (or mild chili). While Matthew lists more "blesseds" than Luke does, Luke pairs up each of his "blesseds" with a dab of spicy "woe."

Part of what got me thinking of the "spiciness" of Luke's woes was a rather provocative translation I read this week, in which a pastor suggested that we might better understand the flavor of Jesus' words here, if we translated it:

"F--k you who are rich...

F--k you who have more than you need...

F--k you who are laughing...

F--k you with the good reputations...

Look, I'm not claiming it's a literal translation, or what you should say in your churches tomorrow. But Jesus appears to have a really visceral response to some people hoarding wealth and power so others can barely survive. And seems to think we should too. And I know I'm condemning myself too when I understand it this way." (1)

If you remember the passage we sang about and talked about last week – it was the story of Jesus telling Simon the fisherman to go back out into the Sea of Galilee after a night of fruitless fishing and cast his nets into the water. Although he doesn't think it'll do any good, Simon does it anyway, and he catches more fish than he or his net or his boat can handle. (2)

Jesus spent much of his time and ministry in fishing villages, and fishing work

was common and cruel. From what I've read, it sounds more like sharecropping or indentured servitude. You had to get permits to take boats out into particular sections of the water – and you could only fish there. Whatever you caught was taxed within an inch of its life. You could hardly ever expect to make enough to break free from the debt of the equipment you owned. It was a system that was never designed for you to break free. (3)

Perhaps there was a myth dangled tantalizingly, that was called “The Galileean Dream” – and folks then, as now, were taught that if they worked hard enough, they'd pay off their debts, and buy their own boats, and their children would grow up to be white collar tax collectors ... much like “The American Dream” claims.

So, it is to a community of people bound to this fishing industry that Jesus gives his sermon on the plain – to folks “from the coastal regions.” And the scripture says that the reason they were there was because they wanted to be healed – of their diseases, of the spirits that troubled them. They wanted to touch him – to *touch* power, to *touch* healing, to *touch* hope. Thomas-like, they wanted more than the *idea* of a Christ or Messiah or prophet – they wanted to *be there* and *experience*, and have their *reality* be changed, not just their minds. They wanted something better for themselves.

You might have had a bit of a start when you glanced at the image on your bulletin today. I was taken with this image of Jesus with a person troubled by a tormenting spirit. I thought maybe it was a bit melodramatic for your run-of-the-mill CMCL bulletin cover, but then I think of the *very real* Big Bads that loom over people, and I think this image might be exactly right –

the face of addiction
of fear
of shame
of trauma
of illness – of body, spirit or mind
of impending ecological disaster
of broken hearts and
broken records in our heads that repeat hurtful messages
of debt – literal, financial debt

Jesus was preaching and teaching in a world of great inequality and especially when it talks about “crowds” being gathered, it's the folks on the lesser end of the inequation. In my observation, the “haves” that talk to Jesus seem to seek him out one on one, or least get smaller audiences: think the rich young ruler, and Nicodemus and Zacchaeus.

And Jesus tells this crowd: Yes. The world is not as it should be. It *should* be turned upside down. Blessed are you who weep now and hunger now, who are poor and laughed at. In *my* world, you are laughing and feasting,

Interestingly, he doesn't say, “you who are poor shall be rich.” He says to the poor, “Yours is the kingdom of God.” “Yours” – a word of possession. In Jesus' world, the kingdom of God, the poor have possession – have ownership, claim, control.

And ultimately that's what is dearest to have, and hardest to relinquish.

It is not unheard of to find great generosity among the wealthy. But philanthropy and generosity (giving away your money) are not the same thing as giving

away *control* of your resources.

One of my online pet peeves is videos of pranks pulled on homeless people. While a hidden camera is rolling, an actor give a homeless person a sum of money. That person goes down to the store and buys needed provisions. Then another actor will sit down next to the homeless person and tell a tale of hardship and woe – that they just lost money and can't get home, or have a sick child, etc. (4)

Then the homeless person says, "wait a sec," goes to the store and returns all that he'd bought to get his money back and give it to the needy stranger.

"Oh, what a good person!" the narrator, or closed-captioning, says. "See, not all homeless people are going to buy drugs." *This* person was *worthy* of help. And then there's a big reveal and the homeless person is congratulated for being so generous, and gets to keep the money, etc.

It's somehow acceptable societally to judge the poor person on the city street who asks for a dollar. Or to judge the person in the grocery store who's spending their EBT money on something we don't evaluate to be a necessity

But where are the videos following the middle-class and wealthy folks? The hidden camera that shows what Middle Class Michael does after his paycheck is electronically deposited in his bank? His money is perceived to be *his* to do with as he pleases, whereas the homeless or poor person's money is perceived to be "ours," or the government's, so "we" should be able to verify what they do with their money. Whose stewardship gets to be handled in the privacy? Whose in public?

It's one of the reasons that giving and receiving can be so complicated – and why we all prefer to be givers. Because when you're given a gift, especially a financial one, it can feel like the money is never really yours, and it can become heavy with the weight of the eyes and expectations upon it.

Forgive us our debts, indeed, oh Lord.

For they weigh heavy, and ours is a culture that expects indebtedness, indebtedness is practically patriotism, and ours is a culture that allows usurious interest-charging practices.

It's interesting thinking of baptism – of being *born again* -- in relation to indebtedness ... Jubilee is the word for being materially born again, you might say. But it's interesting how we've embraced the ritual of baptism – the *metaphorical* cleaning of the slate -- but never embraced the material/financial slate-cleaning of jubilee.

Powerful ideas, though. Ideas that don't just provoke the mind, though, but that represent the things you can hardly dare admit you dream of healing/wholeness/control of your own material destiny, and freedom from the inner and outer voices that terrorize. And things that require making upside-down choices in order to live into these upside-down hopes.

That's what they were coming for, when they gathered around Jesus on the plain that day.

Why might *we* have been in that crowd? What do we come to church for? What do we come to God for?

Is there a need for upside-downing in your life?

A need to seek the healing of God and the healing of a chosen community?

Maybe it's reassurance that weeping will turn to laughter ... some day.

Maybe it's a deep desire to make sense of privilege, and somehow divest of the ways in which a disproportionate amount has been given to you in your lifetime ...

When it comes to the disproportionate distribution of wealth in our world, notions of "deserving" or "undeserving" seem almost irrelevant. No one "deserves" wealth, and certainly no one "deserves" destitution.

What are the blessings we *need*? The needs that we can not turn upside-down on our own?

What are the "f-yous" that we need help in facing? For which we need forgiveness and a blueprint to reparation?

How do these realities inform our identity as a congregation?

On March 24, we are going to be looking at our life together as a congregation. For many years, we practiced re-covenanting as a congregation in a particular way. We passed out copies of CMCL's covenant, along with three boxes to check: I'm renewing my membership, I'm not renewing my membership or I'd like to talk with someone about becoming a member.

Then on two Sundays in January, folks would come forward during the service and drop their paper in a receptacle of some sort indicating their intentions of being (or not being) an active member of the congregation that year.

It's always been kind of complicated, because not everyone who attends here – even very active attenders for *decades* -- chooses to become members. So it was hard for some folks to know how they intersected with re-covenanting. And those of us in leadership have struggled to interpret *non responses*. Were those just folks who happened not to attend those Sundays – or was non-response a choice to not continue active membership?

So, last year, Pastoral Team decided to try a new ritual. Instead of asking folks to sign their name to the covenant, we built a service around the reading of CMCL's "Core Values" and invited each person – member or not – to drop a stone in a bowl of water to remind ourselves of the ripple that each of our presence's makes in the community, and to see the water level rise as we each add stone upon stone to the bowl.

What we communicated to the congregation, and what our hope continues to be, is that we shift our way of thinking about membership. That folks within CMCL might feel free to come to us at any time of the year if they need to communicate a change in status, or would like to discern a movement toward, or a movement away, from the congregation.

As church attendance patterns everywhere, not just CMCL, shift such that "regular attendance" means fewer Sundays a month than it used to, it's honestly harder for us to assess the meaning behind individuals' changing attendance patterns, so we sometimes miss opportunities to reach out. One of the things that folks have consistently told us on Pastoral Team – that one of the things they love most about CMCL is that there's no guilt-trip about attendance. But we also have heard from folks that it hurt when they began to attend less frequently, and no one reached out to say they'd noticed and were missing them.

In the midst of all this, though, it is honestly harder for us to assess everyone's attendance patterns, so we sometimes miss out on opportunities to reach out and say,

“Hey! I’ve noticed that you’re not around as much. Is everything ok?”

Questions like that can be scary. One time when I preached a sermon reminding folks that their presence really matters, really makes a difference, and encouraging us to be intentional about our attendance pattern. I literally got an email the next day from someone who perceived that their attendance wasn’t frequent enough. They felt shame about it and asked to have their remove their membership, because they felt bad they weren’t a good enough attender. That is, of course, the last possible thing I could have desired.

This congregation, at its founding, decided to build into its structure a set of common goals to hold each other to. These goals include, but are not limited to, attendance. The covenant was written in the late 1980s, when both CMCL and its founding members were young. I recently heard that the median age of CMCLers in the early years of the congregation was 27 years old!

CMCL was very much trying to be an upside-down church when we were founded: upside-down from many of the church experiences of the founders. A place of healing previous torments of institutional patriarchy and homophobia. Many people did have a sense of this kind of ghost haunting them from previous religious experience. They wanted a place to speak authentically of faith, even if it meant voicing questions, and they wanted a place where being divorced or being LGBTQ+ didn’t mean you were shunned or shut up, but rather welcomed and part of the family. CMCL was an upside-down church compared to most Mennonite churches in *this* area for many years, for sure.

The language of the covenant might not be exactly the theological language we use on a weekly basis here now, but the essence of the covenant is a call to “commit ourselves to face our diverse” theological understandings with a spirit of openness and love for one another,” and an expectation that we show up for each other on a regular basis. (5)

This year we invite you to take the covenant with you – we’re passing out a hard copy, but you can always find it on the CMCL website, too. We invite you to think *not* of a box to check, or a dotted line to sign on, but to flip the goals into reflective questions for the coming month ...

I am offering some examples of questions you might use to engage the goals of the covenant. They are meant as prompts and suggestions – there might be different questions that come to mind for you when you read down through these goals.

The idea is that on Sunday, March 24, we focus not only on the Core Values that bring us together, but that we also come having given prayerful thought to the ways we will choose to be present with one another in the coming year.

There are 35 days between now and March 24, and 12 goals. Do the math, that’s one goal to ponder every three days.

(1) Rev. Lura N. Groen, public Facebook post

(2) Luke 5:1-11, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=417633186>

(3) K. C. Hanson, “The Galileean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27, pp. 99-111. 1997

(4) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qS_yRy5EYQk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIKqdmpeAMo>

(5) <https://communitymennonite.org/about-us/what-we-believe/covenant/>

