

# Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

February 17, 2019

Luke's less familiar version of the Beatitudes is really kind of shocking. Where, for instance, Matthew softens his Beatitude by saying that the "poor in spirit" are blessed ("poor in spirit" could mean any of us humble souls), Luke says it's just plain *poor* people who are blessed. That's radical politics in any age.

But there's more. Luke brings an Old Testament feel to his Beatitudes by matching blessings to corresponding woes. It feels like we're back in Deuteronomy, where God scares Israel with blessings and curses just before they enter the Promised Land. So, blessed are the poor, Luke says, but woe to the wealthy. As I say, radical politics in any age.

The stakes for Luke are the highest possible, though, because his blessings and woes are meant to communicate the difference between life with God and life without God. Without God, existence is empty, anxious, depressing, scary, confusing, cursed, unfree – the way life can actually seem to us, say, if payday is too far in the future, or if we turn on the TV news on any given night.

Directly opposite is the blessed world with God in it, but Luke's blessings are *weird*. They don't make sense. Blessed are the poor, he says, the hungry, those who mourn their losses, those who are hated. And if you read on beyond the Beatitudes in Luke's gospel, it only gets worse. Love your enemies, he tells us, pray for your abusers. When somebody takes your stuff don't look to get it back. If they take your coat, give them your shirt too. This isn't just radical. It's insane.

So, let me tell you a couple of stories to make sense of it, but first, let me remind you who Jesus is talking to in Luke's gospel. The people in Jesus' audience were the sort of folks who just might have heard those insane beatitudes and said to themselves, yeah, they make sense. The people in Jesus' audience were first century Palestinian peasants, the wretched of the earth, abused, exploited, diseased, marginal, hungry, always with somebody's boot on their neck. "Blessed are the poor, woe to the wealthy," falls differently on their ears. Radical.

So, here's the first story.

Frederick Douglass was an escaped slave who became a leader of African American consciousness before, during and after our Civil War. In his autobiography, Douglass describes his woe and his blessing. "Why am I a slave?" he asks, and gives this telling answer, "it was not color, but crime, not God, but man that afford the true explanation of the existence of slavery...[and] what man can make, man can unmake." Consequently, he concludes, "I distinctly remember [even as a slave] being most strongly impressed with the idea of being a free man. This cheering assurance was an inborn dream of my human nature."

Woe and blessing. The woe is fierce: slavery, laboring at lightning speed to avoid the lash, sundered forever from blood kin. Yet, Douglass knew that the denial of his freedom was merely of man, not ordained by God. Freedom, in contrast, is an

inborn dream of his human nature, ordained not of man but by God. Slavery or freedom. Man or God. Woe or blessing. It was a choice. That was the way Frederick Douglass saw his choice in life.

But, oh what a distance between them. Douglass would have to stake his very life on freedom, on blessing, on God. He would have to put his fragile mortal body at risk to escape, and then travel a long, perilous Underground Railway before he could get to beatitude.

The perilous Underground Railway that reaches from woe to blessing. That brings us to our second story. How to actually travel from woe to freedom's state of beatitude.

The Australian novelist Elizabeth Harrower describes a similar pairing of woe and blessing, enslavement and freedom, in a household where an alcoholic husband in his forties controls the lives of his wife and her sister, both much younger than he, and, therefore, vulnerable to his abusive control. The older sister who is the wife is fully enslaved. She accepts her husband's abuse because she is too weak to resist the force of his drunken rants about how he's always the victim in a world full of villains who have treated him unfairly. Against any reasonable judgment, "she pities him, and her pity enslaves her." Rationalized pity replaces her judgment and dissolves her very selfhood into her husband's alcoholic rage. Unlike Frederick Douglass, she does not see that she has a choice. She does not see a God able to unmake what man has made.

Her younger sister, however, is different. "Exclusiveness in personal relationship," she tells herself, "is a trap." Her story is a constant struggle to keep something of herself for herself in the face of her brother-in-law's manipulative rage. For, what does my abuser want, she wonders, but "to have me see everything as he sees it." He demands that I be nobody apart from him, entirely his possession, enslaved.

And that is always what the enemies Luke speaks of want from any of us. Not only the alcoholic in the household, but the grade-school bully, the monstrous workplace boss, the sabotaging co-worker, the neighborhood gossip, the stalker, the plantation master, the religious demagogue, the terrorist (think of ISIS sucking dry our Christian love with their horrifying videos!), the Pontius Pilate's, Herod's and Caesar's of the world...they all want us to see only what they see, with nothing left for us, no space for our souls. And every bit of that is true not just of abusers and enslavers, but of anybody who does not love you and only wants to use you.

So, this younger sister, as her painful story unfolds, struggles constantly, throughout years lived within a blinding cloud of abuse, to keep some part of herself free from her abuser. She struggles to keep faith with Frederick Douglass' inborn dream of freedom. She endeavors to travel the Underground Railway, that hidden road where the eyes of the abuser, the enslaver cannot see.

Twice she tries to escape but is guilting back by her pitiable sister. Finally, through unexpected turns, and a journey of great spiritual distance, she arrives at the realization that "her life, that futile, wasted, lacerated thing behind her, could be transmuted into an apprenticeship of infinite worth...[because] life had agreed to find her useful." Her existence is transmuted into life because, as the author writes in a rush of revelation, she recognized that "Life itself knew, at last, that she was here."

*Life* knew that she was here! Therefore, she was no longer compelled to see only what her abuser saw. *Life*—her expression of Frederick Douglass' freedom—saw her and found value in her. Her life belonged, finally, to herself and nobody else. Like Douglass, she was her own.

Her turning point—being known by life itself—brings us to one of the most mysterious, yet most profound passages in all of scripture. St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, describes the end point of our lifelong journey into intimacy with God. Paul says that, when we finally see fully, we will know as we are known. We are fulfilled and completed by the knowledge that we are known and valued by God. In the meantime, we all, all of us, have a long and often bitter apprenticeship in this life where we must do hard work to keep some part of our souls free from all the forces this world deploys to make us to see only what other powers see. We must keep some piece of ourselves free from this world so there will be somebody in us, in the end, be known by God.

For being known is all in the world any of us really wants, isn't it? We tell ourselves that we want to be rich and secure and powerful and beautiful and respected and dominant and in control. But in our heart of hearts, we know better. We know, don't we really, that all those things are only tricks to enslave us to something that's never enough. They're not really what we need.

What we really need is just to be known. Not to be alone. To matter. To be somebody in somebody else's heart. Doesn't that give us what all the gold and trophies and billions of the world cannot?

To be known means there's a soul in me that is worth knowing. For me to be really known by you means that there is a fraction of an eternal soul *outside* of me that is free enough to know a fraction of the eternal soul *inside* of me, and to rejoice and celebrate our value together. In such a moment, it would be a sacrilege for me to demand that you see only as I see. We are in an abuser-free, an enslaver-free, a user-free zone.

That zone is the Underground Railway, where unimaginable miracles take place out of sight of the enslavers and abusers who cannot see the value that souls like yours and mine find in one another. We do not stand still here. We travel onward, and come to more and more distant stations on the Underground Railway, where ever greater numbers of souls encounter one another and transmute Frederick Douglass' inborn dream of personal freedom into Dr. King's unimaginable dream of freedom where little black children and little white children play together, and, we must pray, even Luke's rich and poor dance together. Then, the energy of *their* shared souls drives us on to the final station on the Underground Railway, where we are free at last to know that God himself knows us all, and is known by us, and dances and plays with us, and sets us free from all our woe.

Blessed, therefore, are those poor, unowned by this world's wealth, who live to know and be known by other souls, so that in the end, we can be known by the God who loves us all, because he knelt, and shaped our souls with his loving hands, and breathed his life into us, in the beginning.

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