

February 20, 2022 | Journey Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 6:17-31](#)

TITLE: **Straight Talk about Life-Work**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

In good Presbyterian fashion, this sermon on the passage we just heard from Luke 6 has three parts to it—all starting with the letter “L”: location, lesson, and Life-Work learnings. Part 1: The Location. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each describe a sermon Jesus preached to a large crowd of followers. Matthew has Jesus preach from a mountain top; hence, the Sermon on the Mount. Mark has Jesus preach from the seashore. But Luke makes a big deal out of Jesus preaching on a plain, a level place where he was at eye-level with all his listeners. No pontification from on high; here was straight talk on level ground. And for Jesus’ audience, there were no balcony seats or luxury boxes to be monopolized by the rich and powerful. Everything was general admission—a tumble of humanity, rich and poor, young and old, the curious and the questioning—all gathered together to hear the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, as all of you know, anytime you gather a mix of people together in one place, it can be a definite challenge to satisfy their individual needs. The story is told that a group of Presbyterians came together one day for a hymn sing, but they couldn’t agree on what to sing. The optometrists wanted “Be Thou My Vision.” The dentists requested “Crown Him with Many Crowns.” The contractors wanted “The Church’s One Foundation.” And the golfers wanted “There’s a Green Hill Far Away.” I can well imagine that the differences of opinion from today were just as prevalent back in Jesus’ day. The people standing before Jesus were a mixed bunch and likely they all wanted something different from him. If they or someone they loved was ill, they wanted Jesus to be a miracle-worker. If they were anxious, depressed or grieving, they wanted Jesus to bring them a word of comfort and hope. In uncertain times (then and now), we want a personal word from Christ as well as a word that can calm the storms of life raging around us.

Which is why Jesus’ location that day was so important. He came to them on a plain, at their level, literally right there in their midst. He was direct, eye-to-eye, offering words of faith to one and to all. There’s an important lesson in this for us: If you want to care for others as Christ cares, then notice carefully the location in which you find yourself. Are you trying to work from on high, seeing others as below your station, or from a distance, keeping people at arm’s length? Or are you right there in their midst, eye-to-eye, heart-to-heart? What is true for real estate is also true for living faithfully: location, location, location.

Part 2: The Lesson. In the sermon on the plain in Luke’s gospel, Jesus surveyed the crowd before him and then offered them four beatitudes and four woes. Matthew’s version of this sermon is much more popular because it contains eight beatitudes and no woes. But there is wisdom in Luke’s honest pairing of good news/bad news. Any

honest faith talk cannot be all saccharine or all vinegar; it can't be just pie-in-the-sky or fire-and-brimstone. As the great country music theologian Mary Chapin Carpenter put it years ago, "Sometimes you're the windshield, and sometimes you're the bug."

Remember Jesus is by and large talking to a Jewish crowd. So he took something from the Jewish tradition and adapted it to offer a plain talk message there on the plain. There's a pattern in Jewish scripture called "antithetical parallelism" —to say first a good thing and then say it's opposite. In English we do this when we say "On the one hand—many hands make light work. On the other hand—too many cooks spoil the broth." One famous Jewish example of antithetical parallelism is found in Psalm 1. It opens by saying "Blessed are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked. They prosper like trees planted by streams of water." A few verses later, it says "But the wicked are not so. They are like chaff that the wind drives away." The point is not to suggest you are one thing and not the other. Rather these parallels of opposites remind us that we can be both one AND the other—good like trees planted by water; bad like chaff blowing in the wind—and so hopefully we will choose what is good.

Jesus doesn't mince words with the crowd gathered around him. He names four blessings and four woes that likely touched every one of them—sometimes with a dose from each category. "Are you poor? Blessed are you for yours is the Kingdom of God... Are you rich? Woe to you for you treat your riches as if you already have God's kingdom." "Are you hungry? Hold on, you will be filled—even satisfied with something worth more than food. Are you full now? Woe to you, for you have no appetite for what is of eternal value." Sometimes we wish Jesus would just put us in one group or the other: "Are you weeping now? Don't fear, for in time you will laugh again. But you, are you laughing? Woe to you; you'll be crying soon enough." Remember, Jesus said all these things to one single group of people. It was not an "us vs. them" sermon. It was a both/and type of sermon. He told them not to be filled with despair but neither be filled with false pride. That may not be the message they wanted to hear, but it was the plain, honest truth for them and for all of us.

There's a story about an Amish farmer who was confronted by an overly enthusiastic young evangelist. The man asked, "Brother, have you been saved? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" To which the Amish gentleman replied, "Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here is the name of my banker, my neighbor, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask them if I am saved." We are seldom the best person to answer the question about whether we are faithful or unfaithful. There are times blessings fall softly on our ears and are just what we need to hear; just as there are times criticism hits us in the chest and reminds us what we need to change. That was why Jesus started his sermon on the plain with the lesson he did.

Part 3: Life-Work Learnings: I imagine that Jesus' tone softened before he went on with his message. And what he said next was something comforting and invitational—v. 27 "*But I say to you that listen.*" To you that listen. To you that have quieted your own inner

voice long enough to let the still, small voice of God echo inside you for a moment, hear now the learnings I would offer you. Jesus then named nine examples of love in action—surprising examples, plain truth examples. *Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse, pray for the abuser; if struck, turn the other cheek; if your coat is requested, offer your shirt too. Give to all who beg; don't ask back for what has been taken. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

There have been times over the years when people have notified me that they will no longer be attending our church and we should remove them from the mailing list. If this decision seems to have come out of the blue and I'm able to follow up with them, I'll ask if there was a reason for this sudden break. Often I'll get a vague response like "Our spiritual needs weren't being met." That response saddens and confuses me. We go to banks or stores or restaurants to meet our needs, but I don't see how that consumer mentality can be applied to churches. Not a church that hears Jesus say, *Love your enemies; seek out those with whom you disagree; give without expecting a reward in return.* The barometer has never been our spiritual needs. The barometer is the needs of those beside us in the crowd—those who listen—those who are blessed and those who struggle with woes—us and them together. The spiritual flow in all of Jesus' instructions is not inward, but outward. It is Christ's plain truth reminder to seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness and then the deeper things—blessings, peace, joy, will be given to you.

Which is precisely why I think Jesus' tone softened when he got to this part of his sermon. You cannot shout at someone, "Hey, love your enemy." This is not behavior that can be coerced. Goodness knows, it is not even behavior that we'll be successful in doing 75% of the time. It is contrary to much of what we've been taught in the hard knock school of life. Which is why Jesus said these words gently, compassionately, and why he ended with the greatest truth of all. *Do unto others as you would have them do to you.* That commandment requires us to first ask, "What do I want most of all? What is the yearning of my spirit? Am I filled with things, but feel empty of substance? Am I distracted and entertained, but feel my life lacks purpose? Am I literally poor or hungry or alone or unjustly pushed to the margins?"

The comfort Jesus offers is that he sees us just as we are. He knows our hearts, our pain, our distractedness and unease. So with the learnings he would offer, he turns our gaze to those around us and says, "Look you are not alone. Others around you are feeling the same things—good and bad, blessings and woes. As you can really see that and respond to that, you allow the healing you seek to come to you as well. As you do unto others, it will be done to you as well."

Jesus spoke plainly that day on level ground. He held up the antitheses of life, the good and bad around us and within us. Then he offered words of comfort as well as challenge. We are to live a life shaped by risk-tasking, counter-cultural love. We are to live so that our neighbors, banker, and employees know whether or not we are saved.

We are to care enough about ourselves and how we are treated that it becomes the primary guide for how we treat others. These are all life-work learnings for us, children of God, followers of Christ, today.

AMEN