

*17 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. 18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. 20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 22 "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. 24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25 "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

I don't know where your eyes might have been drawn in our scripture for today, but I haven't been able to take my eyes off the crowd. Did you see them? This vast mix of people?

Twelve of them, we learn, have just been "promoted" to Apostle status because anyone knows that if you are trying to pull off goals and objectives, you need a reliable team surrounding you...especially when the hefty mission is saving the world. So, after spending a night on the mountain in discerning prayer, Jesus chooses his leadership team – 12 faithful followers that he will teach, train, and mentor. The 12 includes faithful men who had dropped their careers and left their families and followed him. The group includes Matthew, a tax collector, thus understood to be a societal leper for cooperating with the oppressive Roman Empire. The group included a Zealot named Simon, The Zealots were a political movement that sought to incite the people Judea to rebel against the Roman Empire and expel it from the Holy Land by force of arms. The twelve also included Judas Iscariot, the traitor.

One thing we can say: Jesus did not surround himself with a bunch of yes men, destined to do his bidding. He had twelve people who had different ideas about how to exist in the world and how the world, or their world at least, should be saved. He had people who would be at conflict with one another: I mean, can you imagine how Matthew the tax collector, serving Rome, must have gotten along with Simon the Zealot, determined to destroy it? Can you imagine how working-class fishermen were going to share leadership with strategic power thinkers like Judas?

Jesus doesn't take the easy way when he begins to build this community of faith that will eventually become the church. Yet, Jesus chooses them because he sees something in them that lets him know this group will be a firm foundation for what he is building...even Judas...because sometimes communities have people whose choices disrupt and destroy, yet a solid community finds ways to restore peace and rebuild when members miss the mark in doing what is right for the people.

So, with the twelve chosen, Jesus leads them down the mountain and into the crowd waiting below, and it's when they all come together that we can start to get a sense for what Luke might want to show us. We find, there on the plain, a community that has come together because they are seeking something. We are told that in addition to the 12 apostles, there is a great crowd of disciples – so we know that Jesus has far more followers than just the 12, he has started a movement. Luke seems to imply that these are folks who have come to hear more of what Jesus has to say. He has their attention; they are looking for answers to their questions of faith and struggle. Then we are told that in addition to

the great crowd who has come to hear, is a great multitude of people who have come to be healed. This great multitude includes people from Judea and Jerusalem, fellow Jews who are drawn to Jesus. Then, Luke slips in, so innocently that we hardly notice it, “and [people] from the coast [cities] of Tyre and Sidon.” Why is that significant? Because Tyre and Sidon are described in scripture as terrible cities worthy of destruction. They were mostly gentile, idol worshiping cultures that had been at odds with Israel for centuries. So, part of the great multitude who have come to see Jesus are foreign gentiles who have traveled some distance so that they too can have a chance to be touched by Jesus.

This is why I can't take my eyes off this crowd – because it is vast, it is needy, it is messy, and confusing, and represents all kind of social-political-economic division. I can't take my eyes off this crowd because it is our world I see gathered there. Our world represented there. It is Jew and Gentile, it is Foreign and domestic, it is citizen and alien, it is saint, and it is sinner, it is those who are devoted and those who are curious, it is the healed and the sick, the whole and the needy, the haves and the have nots. It is community in all its sense of privilege and oppression, belonging and exclusion. In short...it is humanity standing at the foot of the holy mountain, mingling together in hope for something that will clean up the mess and restore peace.

Some seem to only want to listen to Jesus, but others want to be healed by him. Yet all of them want to touch him and get a dose of his power, even those who don't acknowledge they need healing. Yet Luke says, in the end...Jesus healed them all, but of what? Some came so they could walk again, or be free of their mental illness, or be cured of their disease. But maybe, in the great multitude of humanity, some found healing of their prejudices, healing from their bent toward division and bias, healing from their social blindness or their narrowmindedness. Because, well, don't we all need healing of that too before we can become the Kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven?

Whether we recognize it initially or not, we can't be the community of God by pushing away that which isn't like us...because according to Scripture, there is something of God in all of us. We can see it clearly, there on Luke's plain. A vast multitude of people, and Jesus is there for them all. None are first...none are above the other...none are treated differently in the end. All are healed and it isn't just by the touch of Jesus that they are healed, it is also by the hope instilled by his teaching.

Now, I think we can admit that this teaching is a bit hard for us to understand. How can we understand “Blessed are the poor,” when we look and see the struggle of poverty around us?

“Blessed are hungry,” when we know the dangers of food scarcity and famine?

“Blessed are those who weep,” when we know the pain of grief?

“Blessed are you when you are hated,” when we know the heartbreak of rejection and exclusion. How do we make sense of this and how was the crowd comforted by it? Sometimes we try to use other words to explain “blessing,” like happy...happy are those who...but that only seems to make it worse. Happy are the poor? Hmm. Happy are those who weep? Uh, I don't think so.

To really understand, I think we first need to be clear on what Jesus is teaching here. He isn't writing a “self-help manual.” He isn't trying to tell us how to become happy people or how to become more grateful people. I don't think we are meant to take these blessings as literal. I think what Jesus is trying to teach us has more to do with the boundaries of belonging to God's kingdom. I think he might be telling us what it means to be inside or outside of God's reign.

Maybe he wants us to understand that it's hard to fully be part of God's community until we become poor in terms of what the world teaches us is valuable.

Maybe being part of God's community means we need to be ravenous for Jesus' word and discerning of anyone else's.

Maybe we can only truly be part of God's kingdom when we can embrace the tears that are inevitable when we wake up and look around us and see the pain and suffering and injustice in the world. Or, when we stand for truth, even if it makes others hate and ridicule us.

Scholar Eugene Peterson paraphrases the woes this way: *"There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it. There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests ... Your task is to be true, not popular."* I invite us all to sit with that this week: Your task is to be true, not popular.

It is as if what Luke wants his privileged friend Theophilus to know, and us as well, that the commitment to follow Jesus is costly. It will cost us almost every part of belonging to this world, so it can give us everything of belonging to the kingdom of God.

Maybe Jesus is saying, seeking worldly wealth and satisfaction while turning a blind eye to the brokenness and needs around you, and then justifying it with lies is not how God's kingdom operates. Jesus is here to show us a better way of being.

Is humanity broken? Yes. But Jesus wants us to see that there is hope for getting it right...for reversing the wrongs and doing the right thing and the answer is in coming together as a community of faith that embraces love and truth – God's truth.

These pronouncements of Jesus are grounded in the present, but they show hope for the future. It is a "now and not yet," promise. The truth of God's call to belong to God's kingdom, is an invitation to understand that while God will fix this world someday, we are invited to start the work TODAY. We are not meant to wait. We are part of a bigger community called to live out hope and show the world glimpses of God's promised future.

Our task is to be true, not popular.

It requires us to take a hard stand when others try to condemn us for believing in the hope that humanity can be a place of compassion and caring and restoration and embrace...and even when they call us names and cast labels upon us, we can, in the words of the great theologian Taylor Swift, shake it off and do the loving, compassionate, empathetic thing anyway.

So, maybe we all keep our eyes on that crowd, because when we can get it right...when we can reach out to Jesus and yearn for healing...we can rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for the kingdom of God...the community of eternity...will be ours.