



AN UNPOPULAR SERMON

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“An Unpopular Sermon” | Luke 6:17-26 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Today’s sermon is entitled “An Unpopular Sermon.” This is not necessarily about the sermon you’re about to hear. It is a reference to the somewhat unpopular sermon that Jesus offered in Luke 6.

The Sermon on the Mount is the well-known collection of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 5-7. When people ask me where to start with Bible reading, I direct them there, to get a feel for the message of Jesus.

In Luke chapter 6, we have a lesser-known collection of Jesus’ teachings, often called the Sermon on the Plain. There are many similarities with the Sermon on the Plain, but some of the teachings in the Sermon on the Plain have a little more edge to them, which likely contributes to their relative unpopularity.

My sense is that Jesus the teacher shared similar teachings in a variety of contexts, with varying emphasis depending on context and audience—kind of like a politician has a stump speech with similar content, and with some variation. Similar teachings came out a little differently each time—maybe like a 9:00 sermon versus and 11:00 sermon!

The teachings in the Sermon on the Plain continue what we’ve already heard in Luke, what some people call the Great Reversal—God’s plan to turn things upside down.

We hear this in Mary’s song, in Luke 1

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

Mary’s message was likely unpopular with the people on thrones and the people who were rich and powerful and influential.

In Luke 4, we read how Jesus began his ministry in his hometown, with much excitement. But when he started talking about good news for the poor, release for the prisoners, and God’s love

for so-called “foreigners” and such, the people didn’t like it, and they tried to chase Jesus off a cliff.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

That’s Luke 4; our reading from the Sermon on the Plain starts in the middle of Luke 6.

In Luke 5 and 6, just before the Sermon on the Plain, and in Luke 7 just after it, we read of many healings—people with physical ailments and a variety of demons (whatever those may be) were seeking Jesus.

And the text tells us that the Sermon on the Plain was shared with people who sought to be healed—so there seems to be some power in the words of Jesus, some correlation between his teaching and healing.

Thus it’s a good idea for us to read and hear the words of Jesus.

Listen for God’s word.

Jesus 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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

“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.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

In college, a “few” years ago, I was a Latin American Studies major. In my senior year, I enrolled in a Latin American Studies advanced seminar, with about ten other students. It was taught by the chair of the department, a brilliant and passionate professor. She was also an intimidating, no-nonsense kind of person. She was notorious for her classes being challenging.

Each week in the class we were assigned to write a two-page paper on a specific topic. She encouraged us to get to the point. Each paper was to be graded on a ten-point scale—not corresponding to any letter grades.

I was a good student in college, getting mostly A’s, so I was rather shocked when I got my first paper back. It was filled with red ink. She critiqued my vague writing, my sloppy thinking, my grammar, and more. There was a big red 4 on the top of the page.

I was stunned, and probably a little defensive at first. A couple of fellow students dropped out after that first week.

I didn’t drop out and I’m glad. Once I got past my defensiveness, as a read through her comments, I realized that she was right about every bit of red ink.

And I came away with a message after that first paper. I don’t remember if she wrote it on the paper, told me to my face, or if I just sensed it from her. The message was: “You can do better.” At that particular time in my life, that message was what I needed to hear. I was coasting along, not really pushing myself. Her red ink and that big number 4 motivated me, and I worked very hard in that class, I learned a lot, my writing and thinking improved, and I ended up with an A-.

You can do better.

Sometimes, I think that is the message of the gospel, the teaching of Jesus.

You can do better.

It has been said that Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus offers comforting words:

Blessed are the poor in spirit
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

In the Sermon on the Plain in Luke, Jesus offers a similar teaching but with a little more specificity.

Blessed are the poor
Blessed are those who are hungry.

Both Matthew's Jesus and Luke's Jesus offer words to comfort the afflicted.

However, as you heard, in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus adds several "woes"—words of "affliction" for those who are too comfortable, which make Sermon on the Plain a bit more "unpopular" than the Sermon on the Mount.

Woe to you who are rich

Woe to you who are full

Instead of "woe", the Common English Bible says "how terrible for you."

The Message says "it's trouble ahead."

I think that's Jesus' way of saying to people who are rich and full and comfortable and privileged and complacent, "You can do better."

The Sermon on the Plain and the Sermon on the Mount both conclude with a parable about two builders. One built with no foundation and one built on rock. When the storm came, the no foundation house fell apart, and the one built on rock stayed solid. Jesus says that those who hear his words and put them into practice are like the wise builder. Those who don't are like a foolish builder.

In The Message puts it bluntly, contrasting a smart carpenter with a dumb carpenter.

The idea is to put God's word into practice, to be a smart carpenter, to have a solid foundation for faithful living. To do that, we have to be able to hear it.

Sometimes we are too comfortable and we need to hear words that challenge us and motivate us to do better, to live better.

Sometimes we are afflicted, and we need words of comfort.

I think about this in our worship with our Prayer of Confession and Proclamation of the Good News. It's almost paradoxical how we, in the same liturgical act, acknowledge that we are unfaithful people who need to confess our sin, and that we are beloved children of God who receive the good news of God's love.

The hard thing is hearing what we need to hear. Each of us has to figure this out. Sometimes we need more of the comfort of the good news, and sometimes we need more of the affliction of the upside-down gospel.

Let's have an example...Two volunteers please, one for each chair.

If X were a mass murderer, and the only message X ever heard was "You are made in the image of God, and God loves you" that would not be appropriate. The message is true, but incomplete. X needs to hear a message about sin and find a new path.

If Y was sad and broken hearted and questioning the meaning of life and the only message they heard was "Repent, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" or even "you can do better" that wouldn't be helpful.

Most of us are somewhere in between these extremes.

We need to listen carefully and deeply, so when we need a word of comfort, we get it, and when we need a word of challenge, we get it.

When listening for the challenging words, we certainly need to be cautious about toxic theology, which heaps guilt and shame on people who don't need guilt and shame.

It helps to listen for God's word together. Other people can help us figure out what we need to hear.

I think it's harder to hear the words of challenge.

This weekend we remember Martin Luther King Jr. He is rightly recognized as



a hero for his leadership in moving us forward on civil rights and the struggle against racism. But over the years, we have watered down his message focusing only on the easier to swallow messages about unity and respect and love.

We forget that he had harsh words about the war in Vietnam, about economic injustice, and about white moderates. Toward the end of his life, he began speaking about revolution—revolution of values and of economics.

On April 4, 1967, one year to the day before he died, he was at the Riverside Church in New York City where he shared his opposition to the Vietnam War and said:

“A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: ‘This is not just.’

His unpopular sermons are hard to hear, but important to hear. We need to continue to do the hard work of seeking God’s justice and righteousness.

Jesus proclaimed the comforting message of God’s love for everyone and he offers us the peace that passes understanding, and he also offers us the challenging and afflicting message, calling his followers to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow.

We need to do our best to hear the whole message in our world today.

In our era, the Presbyterian Church USA is helping us wrestle with the unpopular message of Jesus, through the Matthew 25 framework.



Building congregational vitality

Dismantling structural racism

Eradicating systemic poverty

We continue to work on racial and economic issues, but we prefer the simpler task of being nice and being charitable to doing the hard work of wrestling with structural racism and systemic poverty.

Together, we listen for the good news of God’s unshakable love for us and for the challenging call of the gospel which tells us that sometimes “you can do better.”

I want to close by going back to my Latin American Studies professor, who with her red pen told me “you can do better.” Thinking about that class and that professor over the years, I realize that I was able to hear her challenging message because she was a kind and caring human being. Behind the intimidating and brilliant whip-cracking professorial presence, was a person who deeply cared about students and about the world.

She helped me immensely when I had a health issue in college. She encouraged my interest to travel to Nicaragua between my junior and senior year, helping with connections for housing and contacts in that war torn land, where I researched my senior project on the role of Christianity in the Nicaraguan revolution. And after I graduated, she thanked me for helping her to learn more about Christianity in Latin America.

From that foundation of being a kind and caring person, I and others were able to hear the challenge to do better—in class and in life.

I’m not saying she’s God, but in a similar way, we can hear the challenging call of the gospel, the ongoing invitation to repent and change direction, the call to love all of our neighbors and our enemies too, because we know ultimately of God’s deep and abiding love for each of us and for the world.

Let us pray: Help us to hear O God. If we need a word of comfort, help us know your grace, your peace, your healing, your love. And if we have gotten complacent, distracted, selfish, or indifferent, help us to find the strength and courage to live as faithful followers of Jesus.