Trinity United Church (Nanaimo)
February 24th, 2019
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Sermon- ***The Loser Now Will Be Later to Win***

Luke 6:20-31

I was excited when Foster asked me to preach here at Trinity United this weekend. So a few weeks ago I thought I'd open the lectionary and see what the passages were for this week, so I could begin thinking about the sermon. As I scrolled down the passages I yelped, "Oh no, not the Sermon on the Mount!" Preaching on the Sermon on the Mount- or in this case, the Sermon on the Plain in Luke- is a daunting task. These words are among some of the most profound spiritual teachings ever uttered. And some of the most difficult. It can be almost embarrassing to think that lowly ole me has to say something about this high mountaintop of religious profundity.

But the thing is, these words have made people feel this way since they came into recorded existence. There's long been a debate about whether they were supposed to be taken seriously at all. The 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called them "impossible ideals". Martin Luther agreed, saying they were supposed to make us recognize that we're lowly sinners wholly in need of God's grace and mercy. I had a professor in seminary- a sessional I will note- who causally claimed that these words were not teachings that people were actually supposed to put into practice. Because, *as if* anyone could live that way, *right*? They were more a rhetorical ploy he argued. I remember this making me so mad. I was furious with this suggestion.

Because although I admit their difficulty and how short I fall of their vision, to say they should be simply dismissed is the height of spiritual laziness in my view. Jesus is a mightily demanding teacher, and we need to humble ourselves to that fact if we want to follow in his way. This doesn't mean we have to feel guilty or bad about ourselves when we fall short though, not at all. In the 6th chapter of the *Didache*- which was a 1st century summary of Christian teachings- it says, "If you are able to bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you are not able to do this, do what you are able". Do what you are able to do. But don't throw the whole thing out because it seems too hard! That would be to toss the pearl without a price back into the ocean.

The passage from Luke has been cropped by the lectionary, which is too bad, because it doesn't set the scene for who's there to hear these words of Jesus. It begins by saying that Jesus has been up on a hill praying all night on a mountain, after which time he chooses the twelve disciples. He then walks with them down to the plain where he's going to deliver his sermon. Luke writes, "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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them" (6:7-19). People have gathered from all over the region to hear Jesus and to hopefully be healed by him.

They have diseases and they're filled with unclean spirits. They are tormented from within.

Jesus casting out spirits and healing people is a very common theme in the Gospels. We can look at this in a couple of ways. My friend the Father Chris Dierkes, an Anglican priest who now does shamanic work, has argued in a very interesting article that Jesus might've been a shamanic healer (1). These types of healing practices were common in ancient societies where the shamanic arts were still in use. However, the reality of these healing ways have largely been lost in our modern scientific culture, so the passages of Jesus healing people often seem like outdated fables, and progressive Christians generally no longer believe them. We can even be a little embarrassed by them. But Chris makes a compelling case that Jesus could've been an *actual healer*, and that these stories retain some memory of that fact.

While Chris has convinced me this is likely true, these stories work on a *symbolic level* too. I think when looking at scripture the important question to ask is not *did these things actually happen*, but instead, *what do they mean*? What are they telling us? And it seems to me the stories of Jesus healing mean that Jesus' teachings, if we put them into practice, will heal us. To pick up our cross, to repent, to have faith that can move mountains, to love one's neighbor, to love God with all our strength- these things heal us. They make us whole. And they cast out whatever is tormenting us within. And in our culture today there's a lot that's tormenting us from within. The levels of depression, addiction and loneliness are extremely high in our Western

consumer societies, and this is spreading globally (2). It seems we currently have many demons to be cast out of us, and the Gospels tell us that Jesus' and his teachings can do that job. So Jesus heals on multiple levels.

Jesus begins his Sermon on the Plain by saying, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God", and "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh". This is not Jesus saying that it's great to be poor and hungry. These are sayings that speak of *a great reversal,* and they are words of inspiration for an oppressed people. This motif of a coming reversal where wrongs are righted has been a common theme in radical religious movements all over the world. The setting is always one of deep oppression, where the situation looks dire and hopeless. Out of these material conditions spring explosive religious movements that make bold and emphatic predictions of a coming reversal (3). Later on in the Sermon on the Plain Jesus says, "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" (6:25). This is pretty revolutionary stuff, and it's meant to be a seed of hope for the poor huddled masses that have gathered before Jesus. Poverty, hunger, and subjugation was the reality for almost everyone in Palestine at that time, and these prophetic predictions were supposed to embolden people to hang on, even in the face of what seemed like a hopeless situation.

This theology of reversal still echoes in our culture today, and has been evoked for similar purposes. In Bob Dylan's 1964 civil rights anthem 'The Times They Are A-

Changin', he writes, "For the loser now/ will be later to win/ for the times they are a-changin'" (4). And in Bruce Springsteen's 1995 song 'The Ghost of Tom Joad', which evokes the lead character Tom Joad from John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath,* we find these lines: "He pulls a prayer book out of sleeping bag/ preacher lights up a butt and he takes a drag/ waiting for when the first shall be last and the last shall be first/ in a cardboard box underneath the underpass".

These predictions of a great reversal are not just wishful thinking, something we say to make us feel better for a couple of minutes. They act to draw forth and reveal our *deep yearning for a different world.* They stoke our burning desire to be free from tyranny, and they often activate people's spirit of resistance. They've worked over the centuries in motivating people to carry on in the face of great obstacles. They seem to also capture a certain cosmic truth, a certain way that reality works. For isn't it true that corrupt and repressive systems always eventually fall? There's something about so few people flourishing that evolution doesn't want, and the scales of this imbalance seem to sooner or later tip back towards a more just situation. As the Book of Proverbs says, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18). Maybe these sayings of reversal are a way of telling those in power, tick tock, tick tock. It's only a matter of time before you fall.

Moving on in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus then says "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man" (6:22). Blessed are you when people hate you? Yikes. That doesn't

sound a whole lot like *the prosperity gospel* that's become so popular around the world now does it. I'm not sure those folks are reading the same text. The prosperity gospel says have faith and take Jesus into your heart, and you will get wealthy. The Sermon on the Plain is more like, take some police batons off the head and spend a few nights in a cold jail cell, and Jesus will approve! You will be blessed! Jesus even says next, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy". Oh my. But what came to my mind when I was thinking about this, was people like Nellie McClung and the suffrage movements around the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In campaigning to win women the right to vote, these suffragettes were reviled, arrested, and resisted. But they were on the right side of history weren't they. An endless parade of examples could be added to that one. So many people have worked tirelessly in so many parts of the world, for just a little more justice, peace, and compassion in their societies. And these advances never come for free. Those in power will defame and revile and destroy these movements if they can. It's all part of the slow, grinding process of cultural evolution. But Jesus says if you're doing this work, rejoice, you are participating in the kingdom of God.

Jesus next says, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation". It's an interesting warning, that when we are rich, or we could say when we have material comfort, that we may already take that as our consolation. I find it kind of ironic that as I step into some form of official spiritual leadership, after living as a student for the better part of the last twenty years, I now have a level of material comfort that I've never had before. And on top of that, the United Church treats their

clergy well. It would be easy to settle into all this and walk a comfortable path, making sure not to offend anyone. Gotta get that pension right! But then I hear Jesus saying- warning! Woe to you if you do this! The path of Christ takes more than this, and you better be ready to lose everything. Like I said, Jesus is a pretty challenging guy.

Related to this, Jesus next says, "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets". Man, these are tough lines for pastors. Wouldn't it be great if everyone were speaking well of you? Wouldn't that mean you were doing a good job? Not according to Jesus. No, if everyone is speaking well of you, you're probably not bringing the Gospel, not representing the Word. I'm sure folks here could translate that into their own life or work situations. Jesus seems to be making a comment about leadership, that it takes risks, and will not always make you friends. And in the Gospels Jesus walks that talk, upsetting just about everybody.

Next we come to probably the most difficult teaching of the whole New Testament, and the one that's had people saying "Oh, c'mon!" for two thousand years. "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (6:27-28). Love your enemies? Pray for those who abuse you? Most of us can't even fully love our friends and family, let alone our enemies. Before Jesus, the ethic proposed in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in the ancient Near East more generally, was *Lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye". This was

an important ethical code for the day, one that was an advance over the crude realm of robbery and plunder. It created much needed order and stability. But Jesus is taking this and going beyond it- way beyond it- creating a new moral code that's still far out front of what most of us are capable of. Can you even imagine this "love your enemies" code in our culture today, which is so torn apart by vicious partisanship? It seems completely foreign, almost alien in our time of protracted and bitter culture wars. But it also seems desperately needed. Jesus still beckons to us from a different future, one where these wounds would be healed.

I think a helpful way to look at Jesus' teachings- as difficult as they are- is through a developmental and evolutionary lens. I see Jesus' teachings, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, as still being from the future. Humans, and human cultures, evolve over time. And humans develop morally over time (5). When we look around our world, we might have a hard time believing this, but it's true. Only a hundred and fifty years ago it was perfectly acceptable to beat your kids. There were weapons that were designed specifically for this (6). It wasn't long before that when we still gathered in town squares to watch people being hung or tortured. Humans have a cruel and brutal side no doubt, but this has gradually softened and transformed over time. And the religious giants and their teachings have helped us in that transformation. They have lured us forth into a new earth, and a new humanity. That's not to say our beastly nature has been fully overcome, it hasn't. But we've come a long way. And Jesus continues to lure us further down that road of conscious evolution.

Getting a sense for this *deep-time* perspective helps us to see the Sermon on the Plain not as some set of 'impossible ideals', but rather as human potentials beaconing to us from our uncarved future. It would be like a group of *Australopithecus'* banging away on rocks and sticks in a cave, and then Jimi Hendrix showing up and blasting out a song. They would never believe they could play like that one day. But guess what, their descendants *Homo sapiens* did just that. I used to be a fan of *The Far Side* comics, and a couple ones on this theme have always stayed with me. In one a small cave man orchestra has gathered, and four guys are huddled with their primitive instruments, ready to play. The orchestra conductor has his hands in the air, baton ready, and on his music sheet sits- *one big note.* That's all they know. One note. In another comic two cavemen are sitting beside each other on rocks, and one is reading the paper. He says to the other guy, "Well, I suppose it'll be a few thousand years before we get an 'Art's and Leisure' section".

Through his background in biology Gary Larson, the author of the *Far Side* comics, clearly absorbed the scales of evolutionary time. And if we do the same Jesus' teachings become a lot more intelligible. Jesus might be an outlier- ok a *really big outlier*- but he reveals to humanity what we're capable of. What our future might look like if we manage to get there. So let's not dismiss the Sermon on the Plain so easily. It just might contain blueprints that unlock a most glorious future. And remember, if we can't be perfect like Christ, we do what we're able to do. Jesus begins his ministry with the sick, the tormented, the outcasts, and the lost. That's us,

and God's grace is for all of us. May we receive that grace, be healed along the way, and take part in the great reversals to come. Amen.

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I wanna know did you get the feelin'?
Did you get it down in your soul?
I wanna know did you get the feelin'?
And did the feelin' grow?

Sometimes, when the spirit moves me
I can do many wondrous things
I wanna know when the spirit moves you
Did ye get healed?

- Van Morrison, 'Did Ye Get Healed?'

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Endnotes

(1) Chris Dierkes, 'Jesus the Shaman', *Beams and Struts.* http://beamsandstruts.com/articles/item/1014-jesus-the-shaman

(2) Cf. Bruce Alexander, *The Globalization of Addiction*, 2010.

George Monbiot, 'Neoliberalism is creating loneliness. That's what's tearing us apart'. *The Guardian.* October 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/12/neoliberalism-creating-loneliness-wrenching-society-apart

(3) Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth- Millenarian Prophet*, 1998.

(4) Watch this incredible version of Bruce Springsteen's song from the 25th Anniversary Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame Show (2009). [Search on Youtube- "Bruce Springsteen w.Tom Morello - Ghost of Tom Joad - Madison Square Garden, NYC - 2009/10/29&30"]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-mq0uJ7rlM

(5) Cf. Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal.*

Also: Megan Gambino, 'How Humans Became Moral Animals', *Smithsonianmag.com*, 2012. http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-humans-became-moral-beings-80976434/?sessionGUID=999a5738-a3d0-a108-9016-2265db2e7a67&no-ist=&page=2

(6) Dan Carlin, 'Suffer the Children', *Hardcore History*, Episode 31. http://www.dancarlin.com/product/hardcore-history-31-blitz-suffer-the-children/