

Planting Trees on Level Ground

Luke 6:17-26 and Jeremiah 17:5-10

Location, location, location.

Any real estate agent will tell you that where a house is situated is the critical feature that can make or break a sale.

Location is also important when it comes to gardening.

Some plantings thrive in places that receive direct sunlight. Others need shade or they will wilt and wither.

Soggy soil can cause problems for some plants, while others demand to be well watered.

Location also determines whether our spiritual lives flourish or flounder.

A prophet named Jeremiah compared those who trust in the Lord to be like a tree that is planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.

Because it is planted in a favorable location, "It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."

What Jeremiah was saying is that, those who seek to live a God-trusting life, are sustained by their faith in God during difficult times, like a tree planted by the waters of a stream.

As a result, they do not cease to bear fruit that benefits others.

Then there are those who are oriented towards following a self-centered existence.

They are like a shrub planted in a desolate and dry, uninhabitable wilderness.

Jeremiah's message echoes the first Psalm of the Book of Psalms.

There it is written that "the Lord watches over the *way* of the righteous, but the *way* of the wicked will perish."

Notice that it does not say that God will cause those who live by chasing temporary fame and fortune to perish.

It says that *the way they chose to follow* will perish, because that road is a dead end.

Spiritual poverty within us and inequality around us are predictable outcomes of a life that follows a way other than the ways of mercy, peace and justice that God calls us to walk.

Location is also key to understanding the Beatitudes that Jesus spoke.

Beginning with the location where Jesus spoke them.

In the Gospel of Matthew—the other Gospel that mentions the Beatitudes—these teachings are part of what is known as The Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus delivered them from a mountainside location.

In Luke though, the Beatitudes are part of what is known as “The Sermon on the Plain” because the location where Jesus preached them was from a “level place”.

He chose a place where no one stood higher or lower than anybody else.

Even the locations from which people came to encounter him testified to the inclusiveness of his message.

There were outsiders from places like Tyre and Sidon, as well as insiders from Jerusalem and Judea.

And when you pay close attention to the message of the Beatitudes, it becomes obvious that they are talking about the field being leveled for all people when God’s kingdom is ultimately realized on earth.

Which is why *social* location is just as important as geographic location in understanding the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes contain four blessings for those at the bottom of society.

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated and excluded.

That doesn’t mean that it is a blessing to be impoverished, grieving or marginalized.

The blessing is in the promise that in God’s Kingdom, those who are hungry will be filled, those who weep will laugh. Those who are marginalized will celebrate.

As bad as things appear for these groups of people, Jesus reassures them that God has got their backs.

For each blessing, there is a corresponding woe.

These are directed to those near the top of the ladder.

Each woe is a reverse image of one of the blessings.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.

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

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

But woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

But woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

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 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.

But woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

The Woes are not curses or punishments handed down by God, so much as they are warnings.

Like those red traffic signs that say, “Wrong Way: Do Not Enter” in order to prevent drivers from taking a disastrous wrong turn.

Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God in two ways.

The first is as God’s original and ideal intention for humanity.

God’s intention for humanity always revolved around a universal blessedness, where every person shares a relationship with God and the fruits of that relationship.

In that sense, the kingdom of God is already a present reality, if only in the heart of God.

But until it is also a vision to which the hearts of men and women are vigorously committed to making a reality, the Kingdom of God will remain a dream deferred.

Poverty, suffering, persecution – in short, all the conditions described in the Beatitudes -- are all symptoms of the as yet unfulfilled blessing of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Jesus considered the closing of that gap to be so important that he taught his disciples to pray earnestly for God’s Kingdom to come, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

And to work faithfully to be instruments in the answering of those prayers.

The Beatitudes present us with Jesus’ vision of what that will look like.

And what it looks like begins with a level playing field for all.

In other words, we will recognize the arrival of the God’s Kingdom when the promised blessings contained in the Beatitudes have become a present reality.

In the meantime, progress towards that end ought to be the compelling motivation for following the way that leads towards a fair and just world by addressing the needs of the poor, providing equal access to opportunity, and reversing existing inequities.

For those who have been denied and excluded, and those who seek to lead God- centered and neighbor-centered lives each step in the right direction will be cause for rejoicing.

But for those who have followed a path that benefits some but neglects many, there will be a sense of woe and resistance to the sacrifices required to make all things equal.

Jeremiah wisely identified where the coming of God's kingdom and the fulfillment of the blessings in the Beatitudes must originate.

It begins with a change in the location of the heart.

The difference between blessed and cursed, or between blessings and woes is not defined by divine rewards or punishments.

Neither is it delineated by what one possesses or what one lacks.

It is revealed in where one's heart lays.

Where trust is placed.

Jeremiah warns, "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord."

The consequence of their turning from trusting God is that they become like a desert shrub that doesn't let itself receive the refreshing rains that God sends.

Ironically, it is not a curse from God's hand that they suffer.

It is a curse that comes from turning away from the blessing God offers them with open hands.

Meanwhile, the blessed are those who trust in the Lord.

Their trust in God makes them like a tree *planted* by a stream, which sinks its roots deep to drink from what God offers.

The Hebrew word for "planted" in that verse can also mean "transplanted."

As in being moved from one location that is inhospitable to another one that will be favorable for growth and bearing fruit.

Which is a reminder that even when we may be following a way that leads to a dead end, we are not locked into that route.

We can have a change of heart at any time.

We can choose to uproot and replant our heart to a more suitable location for being blessed and for being a blessing to others.

With a better view of God's intentions for humanity, and a new vantage point from which to discern our role in its fulfillment.

The Bible frequently mentions God blessing people.

But it also speaks of people blessing God in return, by blessing others with the blessedness we have experienced from God.

Blessedness then, is mainly about making choices based on an awareness of the blessing of God's love for you, and responding by extending blessing to others.

The Garden of God's Kingdom is being planted wherever the ground is being made level for all people.

When there is no more lack for some because of the overabundance for others, that is when the Garden of God's Kingdom will truly be established on earth as it is in heaven.

So, may your tree, the tree of your life, be planted or replanted, on the level ground of God's coming Kingdom.

And may your roots reach deep to drink of the waters of God's Spirit so that you may be blessed to be a blessing to others.

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