

-(Holding up arches) Which arch is bigger? You sure? (mix up) Ok, which is bigger? Well, as you can probably see, these two arches are exactly the same size. Some of you may have seen this before, it's called an optical illusion. Basically, when we put the two pieces on top of each other, our eyes are trained to compare to different curves (top of bottom arch with bottom of upper arch). Thus, our eyes trick us into thinking these pieces are different where they are actually cut from the same dimensions. Go have fun with your kids and/or grandkids with that one.

-So you are probably thinking, OK pastor, I expected a sermon and you are holding up two paper-cut outs in front of me. What the heck are you doing?

-I wanted to show you this little exercise because I think it is exactly what Jesus is talking about in our gospel story today from the Gospel of Luke.

-As it turns out, we human beings are pretty good at seeing two "different" size arches in life.

-The Beatitudes, as we like to call this sermon of Jesus, appears in two gospels: the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew. They, of course, are similar in a lot of ways, which points to both of these gospels sharing material of the actual historical words of Jesus. We are, in many ways, touching and encountering the historical Jesus here.

-But, that said, the Beatitudes of Jesus are different in Matthew than they are in Luke. In Matthew, Jesus orates this Moses-like sermon which covers a staggering 3 chapters where in Luke this grand sermon of Jesus barely covers half of a chapter. In Matthew, there are 8 blessings that Jesus recounts where the Gospel of Luke cuts that number of blessings in half with four and introduces 4 new "unique to Luke only" woes which we will get to in a minute.

-Another difference which is important is the geography where each gospel describes Jesus giving this beatitudes sermon (actually, these words of Jesus are probably from multiple sermons all combined together, but we'll leave that discussion for another day). You probably already know the geography difference between the two versions by remembering the title of this section. In Matthew, Jesus gives the "Sermon on the Mount" where in Luke, Jesus gives the "Sermon on the Plain". In Matthew, Jesus goes "up" the mountain recalling the acts of Moses giving the 10 commandments and his closeness to God.

-Luke has a different focus. In Luke right before our story today, we can read that Jesus goes up the mountain to choose his 12 disciples, but then immediately comes back down again. Then the gospel gives this very interesting detail. The Greek literally reads: "And, having descended with them, he stood on a place level" Jesus is not in some skyhigh pulpit or rock, not on some stage or cliff that rises to heaven to give these words. Here is Jesus, the son of God, standing on the same level piece of ground as this ragtag crowd of foreigners, outcasts, and sick.

-Then, Luke uses a very interesting word for when Jesus starts to give his sermon. In verse 20, it literally reads: "and he, having lifted up his gaze to the people" In other words, he is looking UP to his disciples and the people around him! This isn't some hoity toity presidential show from on high, these are words that are spoken "up" to the people. Perhaps Jesus is not only pointing out these two arches are the same length in words, but also in his actions.

-But what is going on here with these "blessings" and "woes"? Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who are hungry now. There are many translations of these sentences and many of which make my skin crawl. Perhaps the worst one is when this is translated as "happy". "Happy are you who are poor". Um, yeah no. I'll just say right now, being poor is awful. Not being able to put food on the table for your loved ones is an awful and dangerous situation. Some of you may have in the past or may have recently experienced being poor or hungry. I believe if we simply say: "Oh, you are blessed/happy", we cheapening what Jesus is actually trying to do.

-The truth is we cannot read Jesus' words here without acknowledging the honor/shame societal system and structure in which Jesus lived. The Greek honor/shame structure is quite simple: think of a body with the head being the most important, then the shoulders, then arms, and so on. Greek writings from this period often discuss how citizens (those with wealth and power) were the "head" of the body, the ones that earned and deserved the privilege of being "first" and the model of society. The ones at the "bottom" or the "feet" of the body were the ones whom "the gods" were punishing or who were not deserving (because of their own actions) of recognition. Clearly, the arches were different lengths in this ancient system of status.

-The word "blessed" here that Jesus uses literally can be translated as "to make large" or "to be envied". Jesus is not saying "Oh there, there, you are blessed" in a kind of patronizing way. Instead he saying: that whole status honor/shame system is garbage. Throw it out. You, yes you, ones who are sick or deformed or malnourished, you are lifted up and are just as envied and "big" as the emperor. You are all on level ground with God. You MATTER and it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, you are risen up to the same level as everyone else.

-So let me ask: is the Greek "body" honor/shame status structure still alive today? Do we need level ground still today?

-Currently, our Montana state legislature is debating on whether or not to continue to offer healthcare to the very poor. Right now, it looks like this will only pass if there are certain "work requirements" connected with the benefits. Those poor people, they must be really lazy, they don't deserve health care unless they can prove it: nevermind if you are a full time at home mother, or pregnant, or have severe mental health challenges, or are having a tough time recovering from alcohol addiction and can't hold down a job,

you still can't have healthcare if you don't work. Do we still live in a society that pretends one arch is different from the other?

-Then, we have Luke's unique offering of Jesus giving "woes" to others on this level ground. "Woe to you who are rich. Woe to you who are full now. Woe to you who are laughing now." Many people read these words as a curse from God which is probably why this part of the Luke Beatitudes is not read very often. It also brings about a great form of "Lutheran guilt" if you are blessed to have money and resources and want a home, good food, your kids to have a good education, etc. Again, however, is our guilt just missing the larger point of Jesus' actual words?

-I think it's important to remember that if Jesus were actually cursing "the rich", he would use a different word. Jesus, in the gospels, curses quite a lot at evil spirits and Satan, and he doesn't use that cursing word here. Instead, he uses this word "Ooahee" or "woe" which actually has much more of an association with grief than it does anger. We get this a little bit from an old English way of detailing someone with sadness as saying they "have the woes".

-The word "rich" here is also a unique word as it doesn't just mean "wealthy", but is also used in other Greek writings to mean "God's plenty". In other words, only the divine can be associated with this level of abundance, yet sometimes we humans think we deserve that abundance. Not only that, but woe to the ones who acquire this abundance and pretend they are God and not connected to anything or anyone else in life.

-Blessed are you who are on the bottom of a societal hierarchical system that is ludicrous and doesn't make any sense whatsoever. Woe to you, meaning you make God mourn the fact that your abundance has twisted your thinking into believing you are a God unto yourself and do not have reliance on anything or anyone else.

-Are these two arches different? Sometimes we pretend they are. Sometimes we look the other way from the damage that is caused when we pretend they are different.

-Yet, the good news remains Jesus breaking in: calling our bluff, calling us back into our humanness, and reminding us of God's grace in the process. We desperately need this good news, these blessings and woes, to be pulled back into ourselves and our creation. May we be able to read these Beatitudes in a new way, stop the pretending, stop trying to be God, and see each other as amazing and beautiful children God.

Amen.