

On his first Sunday at the church, The Rev. Parker preached. At the end of the service he was shaking hands with the people as they left worship. One woman, a long time member of the church said, "Rev Parker, I had heard about you before you came to us. I had heard that you were difficult, that you could be controversial and outspoken. I want to tell you I listened carefully to your sermon and I am pleased to tell you that you said absolutely nothing. Nothing. I'm sure that you will do well at this church.'

This is not a comment you would hear from the religious people after the Sermon on the Plain in our Luke text for today. The words are a statement of what it is like to live as the People of God in this Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims.

Luke's version of the Beatitudes differs greatly with Matthew Sermon on the Mount.

First, Matthew has Jesus take the disciples, the apostles up on a mountain and teaches them. Here, in Luke, Jesus has come down from the mountain to level ground. The teaching is not only to disciples, it is among the people. Included in the crowd are people from all over – Jerusalem, Judea – from Tyre in the North and Sidon in the South. These two towns, Tyre and Sidon may be saying that the audience included Gentiles as well as Jews. Matthew offered 9 blessings and no woe's – judgements. Luke draws four parallels – four blessings and four judgements - Rich and poor, hungry and full, weeping and laughing, rejected and accepted.

We should not be surprised that God favors the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those rejected. If we had heard the song of Mary when she is told she will be the mother of Jesus, we would remember the words, "God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich sent away empty."

Jesus is teaching about behavior of those who live in the Kingdom of God – the people of God. Jesus teaching is not just a hope for the future, it is an agenda to be followed.

Jesus believed it when he told his neighbors at Nazareth –"Today, this reading (bring good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, set free the oppressed) God is going to do this. And if we look in Luke's account of the Acts of the Apostles, we find that the early church tried to live out this idea of reaching out to the poor. In Acts 2 you will find the words, "they had things in common. They gave to all as they had need." Chapter 4 says "There was not a needy person among them." In chapter 11, "The disciples determined that according to their ability each would send relief to those in need."

Matthew calmed down the beatitudes. "Blessed are you poor in spirit" is much less radical than "Blessed are you poor, the hungry, the despised." If you are poor in spirit, that is not to be cast away lightly. But for Luke, Poor means those without food, shelter – those who have no hope for a better tomorrow.

Gustavo Gutierrez, a liberation theologian wrote these words. "God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gracious love of God."

Because we are not poor, this beatitude either mystifies us or leaves us feeling guilty rather than joy-

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ful. Many times we find ourselves in the place of the young ruler who wanted to follow Jesus, but went away sorrowful because he had great possessions. Our response need not be guilt. It calls for a reordering of the priorities we have set for our lives.

And, like the young ruler, we find that difficult.

Then Luke goes into a general principle for living in this Kingdom of God. He teaches about loving our enemies. Jesus followers are not to retaliate. We are not to draw our behavior from those who victimize us and others. Our response is not one of hate, cursing, abusing, striking, stealing or begging (pressure for compassion). The principle for living in God's kingdom is one of love, forgiveness and generosity. We are to be kind – even to the ungrateful and selfish. Why? Because that is the way God is toward us. God is kind to the ungrateful and selfish. God makes the sun to shine on the evil and the good,

God sends the rain of the just and the unjust.

In thinking about God's love we are reminded of the parable of the vineyard. The owner needs his grapes picked. He hires people early in the day, at noon and late in the afternoon. At the end of the work, the owner pays everyone the same. Those who have worked all day are upset, and thought they should have more than those hired late. But they were paid the agreed wage. The owner of the vineyard says, "Do you begrudge my generosity?"

We think of the reception for the younger son who went away and squandered all his living. When he comes home, he is met by his father who welcomes him home and throws a party. The father justifies the reception with the words, "He was dead and now he is alive, he was lost and is found.

The difficulty for many Christians with this teaching by Jesus is two-fold. One, God behaves with persons whose lifestyle does not merit such favor. And two, we are to relate to others in the same gracious manner.

We as God's people don't quarrel with God about how we are treated. We know we need and want God's acceptance and God's forgiveness. Our quarrel is about how God is too generous to others.

The importance of the text today – it causes us to focus on God rather than ourselves. It is a call for us to live as the People of God in God's Kingdom.