



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
17 February 2019
Sermon: "Real Talk"
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Jeremiah 17:5-10
Luke 6:17-26

Jesus Christ for President! *Can you imagine?*

We see Jesus standing before a crowd of his supporters, high on a mountaintop in the sweltering heat. There, he confirms his intentions to run for political office.

With his long hair brushed out and his tunic neatly pressed, he offers some heartfelt remarks:
he tearfully thanks his parents for always believing in him,
he gives a shout out to his campaign-managing apostles,
he shares his typical "Israeli-dream" story:
about how he grew up a poor boy born in a barn,
and with just a few shekels in his pocket and a good work-ethic,
he built up his father's little carpentry business into a home repair empire,
and then he speaks about how he owes everything he has to God (himself) of course.

Jesus offers a slew of campaign promises. Blesses everyone gathered. Kisses a few babies. His words point to a brighter future. His actions offer something fresh to believe in. People feel affirmed and lifted up. And there is a sense of victory in the air. This guy has what it takes *to win!*

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When we talk about Jesus Christ, we rarely speak of him as a political figure. Instead, we like to picture him immersed in a missional, religious life. We iconize Jesus, painting him as a pious priestly soul who seemed to hover over all worldly things: purely focused on saving souls and performing miracles, calming turbulent seas and bringing about global harmony.

The great liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez writes that when we set Jesus apart from politics, his life is no longer a human life. Jesus is not submerged in history, living and responding to the needs of his time, to the pain and injustice all around him.ⁱ

Truth be told, I am not sure if Jesus would not have been a successful politician. Politicians have to be willing to play the game, stir up their base, appeal to the masses.

Jesus had no interest in saying things people *wanted* to hear.
His agenda came from God – not from Super PACs.
He wasn't afraid to speak raw truth, that was critical of the powerful,
that unsteadied the comfortable, that could (and would) have him arrested, beaten, and
killed.

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In today's text, the gospel writer, Luke offers us a vision of Jesus that is certainly not
concerned with swaying voters or pleasing supporters. Luke's version of Christ's
Beatitudes leaves us feeling uncomfortable – unsure of where we stand, unsure of what to
do.

It is quite different than Matthew's account of the story.
We love to lift up Matthew's version: this long list of "*blessed are the poor in spirit,
blessed are the meek, blessed are the peacemakers...*" These radical, wondrous words fill us
with comfort for God's unconditional love and acceptance for each of us in our brokenness
and our pain. We embroider Matthew's Beatitudes into fabric, frame them for our living
room walls, post them on social media underneath the tagline: "#blessed."

But Luke's account of this scene is harder to rally around. It's shorter and punchier, and it
can even feel more exclusive. Matthew says blessed are the *poor in spirit*. Luke says blessed
are you who *are poor*. Luke makes it clear that Jesus is not speaking in metaphors or about
spiritual poverty.

Jesus is taking a political stand: speaking out against our broken systems of power,
speaking on behalf of the oppressed, the frightened, the persecuted, the incarcerated, the
undocumented, the differently abled, the most vulnerable in our society.

Jesus preaches with great urgency 'about and to' the literal poor, the hungry, the weeping,
the most hated. And Jesus declares that God is on the side of these people.
Those whom society has dismissed or demonized, God calls *blessed*.

Luke even takes this a step further.
Instead of simply saying a long list of '*blesseds*,' he adds a harsh list of '*woes*:'"
Blessed are you who are poor – Woe to you who are rich.
Blessed are you who are hungry – Woe to you who are full.
Blessed are you who weep now – Woe to you who are laughing now.
Blessed are you when people hate you – Woe to you when all speak well of you.

Here, Jesus makes it as clear as day that this is no metaphor, but an urgent wake up call.
Jesus is trying to shake us and awaken us to God's hard truth, God's holy agenda,
God's hope for a new kind of world – one reflective of the kingdom, God's life-changing
grace.

Jesus is declaring a radical, liberating truth: God is on the side of those who suffer. So, if you are feeling comfortable and safe (behind a locked door, or a high wall, or in your silence): “Woe to you,” says Jesus. “Wake up and see the world through God’s fresh, wise eyes: a world where the first are last and the last are first. No questions asked.”

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Looking around the room today, I know that we each experience our own forms of suffering. As one of your pastors, I feel privileged to be able to journey alongside you in times of struggle, of illness and loss, transition and doubt. Each of us has had moments where we have felt impoverished inside, times where we have wept, seasons where we have felt unwanted and unloved. These are legitimate pains that God holds close.

But looking around the room, I also know that we are a church family invested in interrogating our own social privilege: the ways that we have benefited from white supremacy, from inequity, from living in this country. We want so badly to quickly right the wrongs, fix our mistakes, but the journey is long and uncharted. It is holy, hard work.

Last week in Bible Study while reading this passage together, we tried desperately to find loop holes in the text, “spiritual shortcuts” (if you will) to secure our spot on Jesus’ *blessed list*. “What do we need to do?” We kept asking.

“Doesn’t Jesus want us to be happy, to be filled?”

“Shouldn’t all God’s children be considered *blessed*?”

These are important questions for us all to wrestle with.

We know that Jesus loves us through and through.

And it is also certain that he is calling us to dig down deep into our faith.

These sorts of questions require us to unsteady our balance,

to listen more deeply, to put our guard down and be self-critical,

to name our privilege,

to open our eyes to ways we have allowed racism and injustice to rule –

instead of risking everything to speak and live out God’s jolting truth.

Christ’s sermon is meant to unsettle us:

to unsettle the systems from which we benefit, to unsettle life as we know it.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was murdered while leading mass for speaking out for the poor and oppressed in El Salvador, once said: “*A gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch at the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed – what gospel is that?*”ⁱⁱ

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In this morning’s text, the Lukan Jesus is not afraid to come face-to-face with those he loves - and engage in *real talk*. In Matthew’s account, Jesus is much more presidential, standing high on a hill, belting out to the crowd in the sunlight.

When I think of Matthew's version, I can't help but smile and think of the Monty Python film: "Life of Brian." *I am sure many of you are also tickled by it.*

We see Jesus standing high on the mountain, so far away that when he offers the words "Blessed are the peacemakers, a man in the crowd calls out. "What was that?"

Another person responds, "I think he said blessed are the cheesemakers."

"What is so special about the cheesemakers?" A woman asks.

"It's obviously not meant to be taken literally," her husband says. "It refers to all manufacturers of dairy products."

There are so many things to love about this scene and film, but what perhaps is most important for us to remember today is that Matthew's inspiring Sermon on the Mount can sometimes feel distant from us – so distant that we can miss some key words, even hear what we want to hear.

The Lukan Jesus, on the other hand, does not mince words. He does not want us to get away with anything. To make sure of it, he delivers his sermon on the plain – speaking directly to those huddled around him.

It's helpful to note that just before this scene, Jesus is praying in the mountains and he has just chosen his twelve apostles. Immediately after this, Jesus leads them down the mountain to the crowd gathered on level ground.

He doesn't give them any time to breathe or prepare themselves. I wonder if he challenged them by saying, "*Woe to those disciples who want to play it safe.*" For just as soon as they promise to follow him, he takes them from the safety of the hills into the danger and uncertainty of the crowd below.

There, among the rich and the poor, the people from near and far, of all shades and backgrounds, there, *here*, Jesus stands among them, among *us*, – he speaks hard truth into our eyes, and offers us healing face-to-face.

Unlike Matthew, who says blessed are the hungry, Luke says blessed are you who are hungry. Woe to you who are full.

Jesus is fearless and direct: he is not standing apart, he is not speaking in metaphors or generations, he is talking to 'you and me' like a devoted parent, like a concerned friend, like a Savior who knows what is best for his beloved.

Jesus's approach ensures that we understand his words, but more importantly that we see his face. His actions invite us into new life and new relationship. Jesus promises to always speak bold truth and to always be with us every step of the way.

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In Matthew, we can imagine ourselves looking up at Jesus high on the hill, but here in Luke we can imagine ourselves looking down. Within moments, our Savior is likely to be sitting on the ground: tending to the wounds of the beggar, comforting the weeping orphan, offering bread to the refugee family of five.

And then we can imagine that Jesus gestures to the wealthy woman in a bright red tunic to come and sit with them, Jesus gestures to the apostles 'new and nervous' to come and sit down, Jesus gestures to 'us' to come and take a seat.

And here on the ground, the crowd sits close together – a community of rich and poor, hungry and full, all on equal ground, able to hear and hang on every holy word.

Theologian Thomas Frank writes: "*Luke makes clear that the Beatitudes are not about righteousness in general. The Beatitudes are not about our aspirations to godliness. They are about a community of disciples standing [and sitting] with the grieving, the poor, the hungry of the land – as Jesus does. They are about practicing the presence of Jesus through acts of care and compassion. Luke insists that the Christian life begins with ministry. Luke asks us to follow Jesus into the crowd, to learn about him, by working alongside him.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

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Friends, this text is a fierce reminder that Jesus was - and is - a holy political figure, immersed in the world, responding to the injustice all around him.

Jesus *did* even make some campaign promises to both the oppressed and to those in power. Jesus says God promises to always stand with those most in need of liberation: *Blessed are you who are poor*. And God promises to always challenge the comfortable: *Woe to you who are rich*.

Jesus promises that he won't let our faith grow lazy or safe or routine. He needs disciples - partners - who are alert, courageous, fearless, and foolish. He needs us to be willing to let go of everything, in order to build a new social order, a kingdom of God right here, right now.

Jesus will never stop calling us down the mountain.
For it is here, amongst the vulnerable,
where we will see the face of Christ.

ⁱ Gustavo Guterrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 1988.

ⁱⁱ Oscar Romero. *The Violence of Love*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers. 1988

ⁱⁱⁱ Cynthia Jarvis & Elizabeth Johnson *Fiesting on the Gospels*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2015