

GOD'S YES AND NO

PSALM 1; LUKE 6:39-49

FEBRUARY 11, 2007

THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

First an opening comment. Unlike Matthew's more famous Beatitudes delivered by Jesus on a mountain, Luke's Jesus preaches his Beatitudes on level ground as if to say this is where people live out their lives, this is the real world, this is the everyday.

The crowd includes: "apostles," the original twelve just recruited; "disciples" others who chose to follow, as was custom, this itinerant rabbi; and "the people," a collection of 'seekers,' certainly the poor and sick but also the rich and powerful as well as Gentiles given the mention of Tyre and Sidon.

In other words, Jesus' message was for everyone.

Two more comments: given the woes that correspond to each blessing Luke's Beatitudes are more edgy and prophetic than Matthew's, yet some say, therefore, more compelling.

Secondly, that word "Beatitudes." Some Bibles use the word "happy" instead of "blessed." The Greek word "makarios" does have connotations of happiness but it has less to do with subjective happiness than with—and here's the key—a condition of life when one's relationship to God is active and healthy.

We are not dealing here with self-help suggestions about how to be happy. We are dealing with a way of life that leads to deep-seated well-being and joy. What's the difference? The first is anchored in my own efforts the second is grounded in my relationship to God.

I want to consider today first, what all these people came for when they gathered to hear Jesus and second, what they got from his sermon. Things haven't changed. The same points will apply to us.

What did they come for? It is at least curious why thousands of people, in a pre-media age, went out of their way to hear this lone rabbi. And Luke gives us the simple, honest answer: they came "to hear him, to be healed of their diseases, cured of unclean spirits, and to touch him." Not unlike that nameless woman, in Luke, who knew if she could but touch the hem of his robe she would be healed.

Indeed, says Luke, "power came out from him and healed them all."

A few weeks ago I referred to the movie "The Pursuit of Happyness." In the church scene when Chris Gardner, played by Will Smith, sits exhausted by life in the pew, the camera scans the choir as the preacher delivers a stirring message about the mountains of life.

As the camera slowly moves across the sea of faces you get the feeling this is the kind of crowd that came to hear Jesus. People visibly scarred by life. Every day people. Every kind of people. People with expectation written all over their faces, longing for hope, needing a word of good news.

And there sits Chris Gardner in the pew with his young son. Bruised by random circumstances in life that according to anyone's sense of fairness should never have

happened to him. But they did and he's looking for some branch, some foothold as he struggles with his mountain.

Why did they come? Why do we come? This business of why we gather each week to meet Jesus, to hear his words and remember his stories is critically important. One consultant says the difference between churches on the decline and churches that thrive is that members of thriving churches make no bones about why they are there.

Yes, they want Sunday schools, choirs and service and fellowship programs but first, like the crowd that gathered to hear Jesus, they want to be healed. They want change because life isn't working for them and they know they can't fix it alone: chronic illness, concern for a family member, a broken relationship or dream.

In declining churches the desire for deep change and healing is rarely mentioned and not welcome in polite conversation. Some who came looking for new life and not finding it will go elsewhere: another church, an AA meeting, a bible study. Thus, the decline.

Jesus said elsewhere he came not for those who are healthy but for those who are sick. Those who are well do not need a physician he said.

Why go to the doctor if you're not sick? I admit we need regular checkups but that's not what I am talking about. In the end, everything revolves around and is driven by the healing we find in Jesus Christ. Call it transformation. Call it new life. Call it resurrection. Call it hope.

All the theology, historical interpretations, social action and mission—all of the scheduling for that matter, are about making clear and accessible this new life Jesus offers. Sometimes I worry that we get hung up on the theology or history or mechanics and forget what it all points to.

And if we lose sight with why we are here, just as some will wander away looking elsewhere for that deep renewal, those who stay will find other reasons to justify their coming. Maybe it will be to preserve an historical landmark, hear a lovely choir, be intellectually stimulated in some way.

I'm not saying any of these are the wrong reasons. I'm saying they are not the core reason. The core reason we are here is because two thousand years ago a man gave his life in a remarkable act of sacrifice. Such an act was and is a complete reversal of the way the world then and the world now operates.

That act opens the way to new possibility. It has the power to end generations of grudging silence or physical illness or present despair. Jesus came into the world to rescue sinners, we're all sinners, we all need to be rescued. Give God thanks today if you know you're a sinner! It is important to be clear about why we are here.

So if they came to be changed what did those legions of people get when they listened to Jesus? What do we get? Well, in a way I've already answered the question. We get healing, we get new life, we get resurrection.

But more specifically when we listen to Jesus we are drawn into a way of life, a way of seeing things, a way of making decisions that reflects the truth that we belong to

God. That's the hinge, the point of leverage, the fulcrum that lifts our broken world into the kingdom of God where there is healing and wholeness.

As the call to worship said today: we and all the earth are the Lord's.

Jesus makes this truth crystal clear in his blessings and woes today. Blessed are you poor, yours is the kingdom of God; blessed are you who are hungry now, you will be filled; blessed are you who weep for you will laugh; blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you on my account, for this is the way they treated the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, full and laughing now and thought well of.

Why this contrast and condemnation of those who are rich and not hungry, happy and thought well of? One simple reason: they operate under the illusion that they are self-sufficient. Their temporary freedom from the intrusions of life has allowed them to think they don't need God. Isolated from the source of life they are alone; building their lives on foundations of sand as one parable puts it. Who of us hasn't been there?

The challenge of the spiritual life is to remember our connection to God even and especially when things are going well. I love that image in the Psalm this morning that says, "happy are those who know they belong to God for they are like trees planted by streams of water, their leaves do not wither, they bear fruit in season and prosper."

What do we get when we listen to Jesus? We are reminded that we belong to God. When life's crises and hardships threaten, Jesus is like a stream of living water to our thirsty souls. And we learn increasingly to let go of our clutch and control of life, to give ourselves to him and to others, which is really a way of giving them to God. And we are filled.

Another big difference between the thriving and declining churches: members and pastors of thriving churches, aware that they need transformation and healing, aware that their lives belong to God, aware that new life is dawning in their hearts carry this message to others.

They don't wait for people to come to them. They don't assume that folks will just show up. The stakes are too high. The message is too important. They don't take chances that any lone sheep will not hear this proclamation of new life so they go out and find people.

They stand in cold parking lots to welcome people to church, they open store front ministries in depressed parts of town, they build houses, mentor new businesses, tutor children. They tell their story about where they found bread and water and life. They throw caution to the wind: what will others think if they know I'm struggling with my own mountain? And they open up to each other.

They are beggars telling other beggars where to find bread, shelter, hope. They do it because someone did it for them. One life rescued is one life brought in from the cold, from the abyss. They were once that one life.

Recently, I called a friend who leads a large, influential congregation in another city. He is distinguished in every way: his community service and urban ministry are renowned.

When I asked how he was he said, "I'm holding on by my fingernails. It's been an incredibly difficult week." The door opened, he was vulnerable. I could share my vulnerability. We affirmed one another's trust that we belong to God and that God is good. Even that brief exchange was enough for the moment.

What do we get when we come to hear Jesus? We get the awareness that we belong to God and through God to one another.

If you are here today as a visitor or as a long time member I hope that something that has been said or some word of Scripture or sound of organ or choir or moment of silence has reaffirmed for you the deep yearning that brings you here.

And I hope in the course of your experience today that some encounter or presentation reminded you that you are a child of God. That you belong to him and that the story of your life could be a life-saving message for someone else today or in the week to come.

You see, we're no different than the crowd that gathered to listen to Jesus. God invites us to say yes to life and no to destruction. "I am setting before you a blessing and a curse," God said to Moses. So let us choose blessing, let us choose life, let us stay close, like those trees planted by streams of water, to the One who leads us safely up the mountains of illness or confusion or loneliness to well-being and joy. Amen.