



**First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
*Creating Community, Welcoming All***

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, February 13, 2022 Reflection (“Luke and Matthew Duke It Out”) Bruce Bennett

Let us pray. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We were in Philly last fall visiting our kids, and I stopped at a gas station / convenience store at a busy intersection. I got out of my car to pay at the pump with my credit card and fill the tank. As I was beginning to do that, four young Black guys, late teens I would guess, who had been hanging out at the doorway to the convenience store, started walking towards me with silly grins on their faces. The lead guy asked me if I would like help pumping gas. I said, in a friendly way, “No thanks...I’m good.”

To make a long story short, I found myself the victim of an aborted mugging. I also began to discover, as it was happening, that I had just become an involuntary actor in a real-life drama about race and class, and I was not the hero.

Remembering this experience gives me a way in to look at this version of the Beatitudes, what is sometimes referred to as, Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain”, less familiar than Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount.” First, let’s be clear what is meant by “The Beatitudes.” The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay says in her UCC blog *Weekly Seeds* says they are “a radical vision of beloved community and the kin-dom of God.” But the two versions are different. Matthew emphasizes Jesus’s Royal family tree - that Jesus is recorded as a direct descendant of King David. That goes with an elevated status, and that would go with him speaking from a high place, for example, like this lectern I’m speaking from, higher up than everyone else here. However, Luke emphasizes the circumstances of Jesus’s birth and life history, which, as far as we know, has up till the start of his ministry been one of poverty and, outside his small circle, one of insignificance. Of course it makes sense that Luke would have Jesus pick a level spot to preach from, not a high one. And it came to me during Bible Study last Thursday that maybe I should be at a level place when I talked about it too, so I’m moving down to the Sanctuary floor. By the way, we all had a great time at Bible Study, and it helped me formulate what I would say here and now. A lot happened, but if I had to pick out the most significant instant, it was when one member chose to read this week’s Bible passage from a very recent and very different translation, *The Message*, by the Rev. Eugene Peterson. Several people said they were uncomfortable with the last three verses of the usual translations we read first, the New Revised Standard Version, and Today’s English Version, the translation in the *Good News Bible*. They made the same harsh judgments on people who could easily be ourselves. However, those same numbered verses in *The Message* seemed to let us off the hook:

Give Away Your Life

24

But it’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you’ll ever get. 25 And it’s trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And it’s trouble ahead if you think life’s all fun and games. There’s suffering to be met, and you’re going to meet it. 26 “There’s trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters

them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.

The version in *The Message* may be regarded as controversial by some scholars, but those last three verses did help by adding some context to the stark judgments of the traditional versions.

Context - we need it, whether we read it or we've seen it or we glean it. Luke paints a picture of Jesus as a wise friend offering healing and hope. He captures Jesus preaching against materialism and supporting the poor and marginalized. At the same time he casts Jesus in the traditional Old Testament image of their Protector. In this role, they expect him to judge those who have sinned, but that judgment does not affect his protective role. The poor people to whom and of whom Jesus speaks know intimately this Old Testament litany and they know that what follows for those who are poor and oppressed is not final judgment but something reassuringly parental like "go and sin no more."

Luke's version has Jesus suggest something else startlingly different than Matthew's - that one's reward for suffering now can come, yes, in the future, but in this life, not only in the next. It is a testament to the depth of Luke's organic, visceral understanding of the origins of Jesus the human being that allows for such revolutionary hope and faith in the possibility of spiritual growth.

I look back at my conflicted feelings during and after my gas pump experience in Philadelphia last fall. I was suddenly plopped into multiple roles. I was judge and judged several different ways. I wondered what life experiences those young guys have had and wondered if they might have wondered about mine. I wonder in how many categories I would fit within both Luke's and Matthew's sermons.

It is important to recognize that even though Luke's and Matthew's versions of the Beatitudes are very different, both are necessary. There is a common saying within the "Black Church" that "God sits high but looks low." Matthew's version, from above, tells what God will do for us who are in need. Luke's version, from among us, tells us what we need to do for ourselves and each other. Loving God...Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven...

Alleluia and Amen.