

February 13, 2022

Luke 6:17-26

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

I want to begin by reading verse seventeen again.

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

That verse and our earlier reading of the gospel came from the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible, which many Lutheran churches read from each Sunday. Now, I want to read verse seventeen from the Common English Bible (CEB) translation. As you listen, pay careful attention to any differences.

¹⁷ Jesus came down from the mountain with them and stood on a large area of level ground. A great company of his disciples and a huge crowd of people from all around Judea and Jerusalem and the area around Tyre and Sidon joined him there.

Did you notice anything? Does anyone care to shout it out or type it in a comment if *joining* us online? (Pause)

All-in-all they are very similar. Yet, there are a couple minor, yet notable differences, that I believe help to emphasize and shed light on a critical component of who Jesus is. Notice, the CEB adds the specific locale from which Jesus came down from inserting the word “mountain.” While the reader will recollect that from earlier verses which detailed him going up the mountain to pray and then choose the twelve apostles, the CEB translation reiterates and reminds the hearer it was the mountain he came down from. From that point on, the verses are nearly identical informing us who was there, a large crowd from Judea and Jerusalem, Tyre, and Sidon. But, then the CEB adds three words to conclude the verse to describe the movement and locale of this huge crowd as they, “joined him there.”

By this point, you might be thinking to yourself why I am concentrating so much on one verse and a couple relative minor modifications to it in another biblical translation. Let’s go pastor, we have the Beatitudes lying in wait. Everyone is familiar with them. They appear to be the true thrust of this passage.

While true, I believe verse seventeen in and of itself is a mini gospel. In the fourth chapter, we found Jesus, teaching in a synagogue in which he said, “I must proclaim the good news of the

kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.” Verse seventeen of chapter six reflects this teaching. The gospel, that is good news, is the very fact Jesus came down that mountain. The good news is that the crowd joined him, had access to the Son of God. He is fulfilling his promise to bring the good news of the kingdom of God to other cities as we are told the huge crowds included people from Tyre and Sidon, coastal cities beyond the realm of Israel and the Jewish people. These would be most likely be Gentiles. Already, we see the “universality of Jesus’ concern.”ⁱ

This one verse was good news for the people then and for people today. Jesus comes down the mountain and all people are invited to join him there. God’s reach, presence and healing have no boundaries or limitations. All are welcome regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, social status, etc.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Old Testament) and into Jesus’ earthly ministry the mountain was a special place, a holy place. It was a place in which one could have an encounter with the divine. Recollect, God delivered the commandments to Moses while on a mountaintop. But now, upon the birth and life of Jesus, a new reality of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God Jesus is ushering in is the truth God’s presence is no longer confined to one place.

The mountain still holds a special place. Jesus frequently prays there. He is transfigured there. He will die upon a hilltop. Yet, Jesus does not stay there. He comes down to a level place, as if Luke is telling us he is on equal footing with those he was come to serve.

This is good news. This is a portrait into the kingdom. This is a revelation of who the Son of God is. Perhaps, you have never felt the inability to “join him there.” Yet, I know far too many have. It is something you have done that in your mind makes you feel unworthy. Or it is something you have done that has caused someone else to project onto you a sense of unworthiness. It’s an illness that has kept you from joining the people of God in worship. It’s the pain of sitting in a pew in which was once shared with a spouse or child who is no longer by your side. It’s because you don’t have the resources or means available.

Verse seventeen affirms the promise Jesus makes himself present. God will not remain distant, high upon a lofty mountaintop. Jesus came down to a level place. On solid footing to be joined to all people. This is good news. No one is closed off from his presence, his kingdom. Nothing can separate us from his love.

At times it’s been challenging to see any good news amidst wave after wave of hardship brought upon by COVID. There is no mistaking the reality of the pain, fear, stress, isolation, exhaustion, havoc, anger, division, and death this virus has unleashed upon humanity. Yet, God has not been on a mountaintop. No, God has come down.

Jesus has made himself known. How many doctors, nurses and chaplains have extended the healing presence of Jesus to those who have been sick, alone, and dying? How many researchers, scientists, and others have tirelessly worked to find ways to combat this virus? How many teachers ventured beyond the confines of a classroom to stand outside the window of a student and wave to them? How many pastors, faith formation teachers, and other church leaders have tirelessly worked to find new opportunities to continue the church's mission of proclaiming the good news and making Jesus' presence known to those hunkered in their homes? How many people have so faithfully given of their financial resources to help those who lost their jobs or were laid off? How many people have made a phone call or sent a card to reveal the fact Jesus yet again has come down and is with us in the mess that is COVID? The examples of Jesus coming down are endless and his presence and healing have been made known in so many ways and through so many people.

God has been at work. Jesus has been coming down. People have been joined to him. I wonder how many people have heard the good news for the first time resulting through the use of technology as the church has gone into people's homes to proclaim the gospel? I wonder how many people who may have felt unworthy to step into the confines of a church building have become part of a worshipping community via the opportunity to join remotely? I wonder how many shut-ins and residents in nursing homes have been able to stay connected to their congregation when prior to this pandemic they were not? I wonder how many have been quarantined or infected with the virus who were able to continue to join their church family in worship? Jesus coming down the mountain to be with the crowds has manifest itself through many new opportunities. Sure, some congregations were already doing this; however, I suspect many more were not.

I sit in this space several times throughout the week praying our pews are once again full. The Bible, this passage, this verse, three words, "Jesus came down" or [the crowd] "joined him there" highlight the importance of God being in relationship with God's people and God's people being in relationship with one another in a physical way. In many ways, this verse and the beatitudes that follow that reveal the good news and promise that God's kingdom belongs to the poor, hungry, those overcome by sorrow and grief, those hated, persecuted and reviled because of following Jesus and proclaiming the good news are a mirror image of perhaps one of the most beautiful passages of what the culmination of God's kingdom will be as found in the words of the book of Revelation 21:3-4 (NRSV):

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

God will be with them face to face on a level footing. The rough edges of life will be smoothed. The pandemics and divisions, hatred and hostility, pain and suffering will be no more. Blessed will be the people of God, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed will be those relegated to the depths of poverty for theirs will be the kingdom of God. Blessed will be those destined to the margins of society for theirs will be the kingdom of God. Blessed will be those who cried out from the depths of their beings. Blessed will be those who hungered like most people will never know. Blessed will be those who proclaimed the good news and were subsequently hated and sent packing because of it.

Yet, the Bible also reveals a God whose love is limitless, whose grace is boundless, whose presence cannot be boxed in. So while, we all pray, hope and look forward to a time in which we will gather safely together again in this space or any other face to face we know that even then there will be those who join from their homes, hospital beds, care centers, hotel rooms, or wherever they may be and just as certain as Jesus is here, he is also there. He has come down. We are joined with him. God has provided new ways and opportunities to be with God’s people.

The word of God is alive. It’s written on the pages of the Bible. It’s found in the Word made flesh that dwells among us. It’s found in one verse. It’s found in three words, “He came down,” “joined to him,” “the third day,” “he rose again,” “you are forgiven,” “Peace to you,” “I love you!”

Something as short as one verse, three words, one smile, one gesture, one handshake, one hug, one dollar, one can of food, one quilt, one meal, one word of comfort, encouragement, hope and healing can mean so much. It can proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and lift up the hope and promise he came down. He is with us. He loves us and he loves the world. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke6x17.htm>