

YearC-Epiphany7-2019-I'll Drink to That

February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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Luke 6:27-38

### **I'll Drink to That!**

Last week we began with Luke's version of the Beatitudes given on the level, in the midst of a crowd of his followers surrounded by a great multitude of people who had come from Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. All of this detail is important when we contrast Luke's version of the Beatitudes with Matthew's version.

Matthew places Jesus on a mountainside bringing a new set of rules for living to the Jewish people just like Moses brought the Ten Commandments. Matthew writes his Gospel story this way to legitimate the Beatitudes by lending Moses' authority to them.

When Laura and I were in the Holy Land we went to the very spot tradition says Jesus delivered Matthew's beatitudes. It's on a beautiful mountainside with a breathtaking view of the Sea of Galilee. When we were there in late February, the wild anemones were blooming amid green grass and scattered rocks where people sat looking out at the scene below them. Being the only clergy couple in our group of 30 or so, Laura and I were asked to take turns reading Matthew's Beatitudes. The leader told us to sit on the rocks a little farther up the mountain so that the people hearing them would turn away from the lake and look up toward us from below. Can you picture it?

By contrast, Luke has Jesus bringing his disciples down off the mountain until they arrive at a level place and this is the place from which Luke's Beatitudes are given; not a mountain. Luke makes no appeal to Moses' authority and does not place Jesus above the people. Instead, Jesus is in the midst of the people, positioned lower than those around him since the narrator says, "Then he looked up at his disciples and said: Blessed are you who are poor" and so on. This is just the opposite of Matthew.

Why the difference? Luke is not Jewish; he's Greek, and a Gentile and writing his Gospel for Gentiles. His cultural story is not hooked to Moses. The Ten Commandments and the authority

of Moses have little meaning for him. For Luke the Good News will have to stand on its own and earn a hearing based on its own merits.

Luke's inclusion of Tyre and Sidon makes clear this message is for everyone; it's a universal Gospel that aims to transform the world. Luke's challenge is similar to our own in that he must convince people of the Gospel's truth based on the message itself without any appeal to tradition. It's like that today. Authority is not trusted. People will only listen to a story different than their own if that story makes sense to them, proves effective in describing the human condition and helps them claim God's salvific action—they can see and feel how God is bringing salvation to the world and it is for all people.

Love your enemies! This is the very heart of Jesus' message, the center piece of his teaching. This is probably the most challenging command in scripture and perhaps in all history. To love our enemies is not necessarily to want to be affectionate and cozy with them. It's to want what is best for them and to be willing to sacrifice to see it happen like we do with our own children. Loving our enemies keeps violence from escalating in our own hearts and our example helps others manage their violence better. Nothing in the world is more important? Our future as a species on earth may depend on our learning this.

Our great temptation is to pursue revenge with a little extra added for good measure. "That will teach them," we say. Our enemies in turn experience our settling the score as further provocation requiring more severe retaliation. And so cycles of revenge get going with an escalation to the extremes. Often the initial offense gets forgotten and each side wants is to win by utterly destroying the other who they now see as totally evil. This can get so severe both sides destroy themselves in their effort to destroy the other. For those who don't believe in Jesus, "Mutually Assured Destruction" provides the threat people believe will save them. It's a very dangerous strategy. Better to sacrifice the idea of revenge than destroy the whole world.

Jesus said, "Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you." Why do this?—to help us, those who are Jesus followers, keep perspective and not lose ourselves in the heat of the moment. When we pray first we don't internalize their curses, allowing them to diminish us with it. When we are tuned to God asking for a blessing on those who abuse us, it's easier to

ignore any shame we may feel when others see us demeaned. A good prayer for this is “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”

Remember Jesus was addressing his twelve disciples and the crowd of disciples around him, not the multitude that had gathered round listening in. We don’t expect people who have not become disciples to understand this. They can’t. Their world is built on hating their enemies, building fragile unity within by naming and blaming enemies without. To love your enemies messes all this up. If there is no “us” and “them” there can be no enemies.

For the world, it’s your enemies that keep your group together and marginally united. Without the enemy other, the world struggles to know how to define its self. When Marcus Rempel entitled his book “Life at the End of Us vs Them,” the title subverts the world who does not think it possible to live with no enemies. To put it positively, Rempel believes it possible to live in community where differences in gender, ethnicity, race, sexual identity, and even disabilities are celebrated as assets.

This is all very difficult to do and Jesus knew that. He started this section on love of enemies by saying “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies.” He knew that many would not listen. It would seem too counterintuitive, too vulnerable, to unprotected and insecure. But Jesus won’t be deterred. “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.” Do you see how Jesus won’t submit to being a passive victim? When he offers his other cheek he is the initiator who acts out of his freedom even though the other may have superior power. He maintains control over the one thing he commands, himself.

Jesus said, “If someone takes your coat, allow him to take your shirt.” This will maintain your freedom while keeping you out of a power struggle that easily escalate. Could this be guidance for living in our contemporary world? Does the Gospel stand on its own and offer something unique and life-saving to the world? I think so.

Jesus expects his followers to live out of a different story than the world around them. His story centers on his cross and resurrection where power over others gets revealed for what it

is. He chides his disciples for thinking their story is no different than the world's story when he says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again." Luke's use of the word "sinners" here is descriptive not punitive or moralistic. It is his way of talking about people who are not followers of Jesus.

So, if we want to live out the Jesus story, what do we do? Jesus says, "love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." I'll drink to that! Amen.