
“Hearing and Healing”

A SERMON on Luke 6:17-26 for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Preached 13 February 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister¹
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You know, following Jesus wasn't so bad for the disciples when it consisted mostly of listening to him preach. After all, who doesn't enjoy sitting back and hanging on every word of a truly captivating speaker and teacher...? And following Jesus wasn't so hard for them when it involved quiet retreats to the countryside for prayer and rest. For those of us who live in a world of hectic busyness and noise—which, really, is most of us to some greater or lesser degree—that sounds quite nice. And following Jesus could be downright enjoyable for the disciples when the big things about Jesus were the miracles of abundant fish and good wine. I mean, you can get me to show to just about anything if you're promising good seafood and decent wine.

Following Jesus would be easy for the disciples if *that* was the sort of stuff that Jesus was about all the time.

But following Jesus was hard.

All the nice, enjoyable, and easy parts were only a small piece of what it meant to follow Jesus. Jesus was also about doing those things that pushed the disciples, made them feel uncomfortable, stretched their idea of what it meant to follow in his footsteps.

Yes, following Jesus would be easy... if it weren't so hard.

You can imagine that this was what the disciples were thinking as they came down from the mountain and saw the scene that was playing out in front of them. Ahead of them a great crowd of people had gathered, all clamouring for Jesus. As the disciples watched, amazed, Jesus went ahead of them right *into* that great crowd. As he went, Jesus spoke with the people who had gathered there. As he went, they brought forward their sick and suffering, and Jesus healed them. As he went, Jesus cast out unclean spirits who were tormenting and afflicting.

Deeper and deeper Jesus went *into* the great crowd of people who hungered for his presence. Deeper and deeper he went *into* this milieu of human brokenness. And the energy flowed out of Jesus, and all who were there and sought healing and wholeness found it.

In the midst of this loud and jostling crowd, this chaotic scene, Jesus looks up to the disciples and began to speak. We might imagine that the disciples were still standing on a high place, holding back a bit, keeping their distance, simply watching everything that was playing out below them. You might even imagine a bit of shock, or disbelief, or discomfort at what they were seeing, as Jesus looked up to them and began to speak the familiar words of the Beatitudes.

There are many ways that the manner in which the Gospel of Matthew remembers the Beatitudes—admittedly the more familiar version to most people—how it differs from the version we encounter in the Gospel of Luke this morning. One of those differences is that, instead of speaking these words to the whole crowd, Luke has Jesus speaking them directly and

¹ This sermon incorporates material adapted from a sermon on this text written by the Rev. Adam Yates, preached by him at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, East Haddam, Connecticut, on 17 February 2019; used and adapted by permission.

specifically to his disciples as he looks up at them.

This might seem like an insignificant distinction, but then again, it might not be. In the context of this story in Luke, Jesus' words to the disciples are a mixture of instruction and invitation. In fact, they basically serve as commission to his disciples. Standing in the middle of the crowd, pouring out Good News and healing upon all who gathered around him, it is as if Jesus is saying to his disciples, "See, *this* is what I am about."

This—*this*—is what it means to follow Jesus. *This* is the work that discipleship entails. *This* is what discipleship looks like.

I wonder what the disciples were thinking as Jesus spoke to them. I wonder how they were feeling. Were they excited by what they saw? Did they see the possibility of what it was that Jesus was leading them into? Did his words move them and fill them with hope? Or... Did what Jesus said overwhelm them, fill them with uncertainty and fear about what they had gotten themselves into? Did the sight of the huge crowd make them want to turn right around and go back up the mountain?

Did those disciples find themselves longing for something simpler? For wedding feasts and turning water into wine. For teachings and conversations over a shared meal before a warm fire. For feeding the multitudes with the absurdly abundant loaves and fishes. Did they long for church potlucks and bake sales? For book groups and children's pageants? For tasteful and tastefully short sermons from the preacher followed by a nice coffee hour?

I mean, that's how we feel sometimes as we hear Jesus' words, right? If we're being honest with ourselves, that is how we feel, isn't it? I know that it is how I feel sometimes. I know that heading home after a really good adult faith formation class, or as I turn off the lights after the last carol has been sung at the last service on Christmas Eve, that I feel an immense sense of satisfaction. In those moments, it's really easy for me to wish that it could always be so straightforward, so simple, so satisfying... and even pretty easy for me to think that it *should* be.

But let's be honest: the great crowd out of the midst of which Jesus calls to us in today's reading? It is a long way from Sunday morning at your typical, respectable mainline Protestant church in a comfortable North American community. It is a long way from coffee hour and youth groups, church softball leagues and ladies' teas. The great crowd that needs and yearns for the greatest healings and deepest hopes that Jesus can offer? It is outside of what we know, what we find familiar. It stretches us. It makes us feel uncomfortable.

And that is not just me saying it. You ask just about any typical middle-class mainline congregation and, if they're being honest with you, they'll tell you: the hardest part of doing the work of discipleship and apostleship is actually getting out there, of pursuing Christ on our streets, in our neighbourhoods, in our local businesses, and at our schools and places of work. If we are, indeed, right in our hunch about how the disciples might have felt as they stood apart, watching what Jesus was doing in the crowd below, that's perhaps because we understand that feeling all too well ourselves. We ourselves, like the first disciples, know what it is like to feel some trepidation about what it is Jesus is asking us to do.

Just because we know that this is hard to do... just because we recognize our own struggle with this work... that does not mean that we don't want to do it anyway. In fact, like with so many things in life, we may well find that the satisfaction, the fulfilment, and even the grace in

such work comes, in part, because it is indeed hard.

I'm not telling you something you don't already know—at least in part. After all, if you simply look at the journey we've taken together over the past few years with intercultural ministry among persons new to Canada—which, in our case, as we know, has taken particular shape among our siblings from Korea—we've already seen ways in which blessing comes through challenge, and how the revelation of Christ in our midst comes most fully when we are “real” and truly relational with one another.

What if we were to take it even further outside our own walls. Imagine what could come if we as a church were involved in some form of service or justice ministry that actually gave us the opportunity to offer real human relationship to those we were serving or helping, and not only money or goods. What if youth connected with this congregation had the opportunity to go on some sort of mission trip or have some other opportunity to engage in both service and relationship with others across difference.

Or, you know what, it doesn't even have to start with anything that “big”, with some sort of major ministry project. Imagine, if you will, something far simpler. Imagine a few small teams of us from our congregation setting aside some time to take some walks together through some neighbourhoods, simply for the purpose of noticing. Imagine starting right here with this neighbourhood in which the church sits, this little block of ours from here over to, say, 172 Street and from 60 Avenue down to Highway 10. You could walk every street in that block in probably an hour or hour and a half total. Or on a different outing, another group could walk up and down a number of the streets and blocks right over there in the central district of “old” Cloverdale.

I bet that if we took the time to do such a thing, all of us would see things that we'd never noticed before. After all, I know that I for one see so much more and notice so much more when I'm not isolated in my car. On our walks, I imagine we'd see lots that gave us hope and hinted at God's work. We'd probably sense new energy coming into town—or, at the very least, new people and new buildings. I suspect we'd notice some businesses trying to make a positive impact on our community through good works, both big and small. And although the pandemic has certainly been a bit of a challenge for this, I bet we'd observe beloved community institutions—like our library, for example—filled with people making use of their services.

And, you know what? I also imagine that we'd see quite a bit of brokenness on our walks, too. We'd probably see some businesses for sale and some empty storefronts. We'd probably see some families and businesses struggling financially. Even for all the places where new buildings are rising from the earth, I suspect we'd notice other spots with homes, storefronts, and institutional edifices crumbling and struggling to keep up with maintenance, some of which would undoubtedly be evidence of even further struggles going on for the people inside their walls.

Do we imagine that we would notice more joy or more despair? Would we find more places that felt like community or more places that felt full of isolation? How many people would we actually see out and about, interacting with one another... and how many people would we only ever see zipping by in cars, all by themselves? Who would seem like a stranger to us? And to whom would we seem like strangers?

My friends, know this: Jesus has gone ahead of us into the brokenness in our

communities. Even now he is in the midst of it, pouring out Good News and healing upon all who are seeking it. Even now he is calling up to us, saying, “Come, *these* are my blessed: the poor and the hungry, the grieving and the outcast.” “Come,” Jesus beckons up to us as we look on, feeling uncertain. “This is what it means to be my disciple. This is what discipleship looks like.”

Friends, I don’t know what it will look like when we step down into the midst of the great crowd to be with Jesus. I don’t know what we will find there. I don’t know what we will experience: the joy, the hope, the suffering, the pain, the brokenness, the healing, and the promise. What I know is that Jesus is calling us into it. What I believe is that Jesus is calling us to join him.

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Following Jesus wouldn’t be so bad if it were mostly adult forums and Bible studies. Following Jesus wouldn’t be so hard if it consisted mostly of church on Sunday and quiet retreats in picturesque settings. Following Jesus would be downright enjoyable if it was mostly about tasty potlucks and beautiful music. Following Jesus would be easy if this was all that Jesus ever asked of us.

But following Jesus is hard.

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.