

February 15, 2019 - Epiphany 6C

Scripture: Luke 6:17-26; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

“Come As You Are: The Soul and Paradox” - Rev Seth D Jones ©

The Gospel of Luke presents us with a scaled down version of the Beatitudes. In Matthew, Jesus’ teaching is much longer and more in depth. But Luke has a purpose in doing this. Luke wants to highlight a significant aspect of Jesus’ method, which is: *Paradox is foundational to the following of Christ*. Scripture, especially the New Testament, is full of paradoxes, the deliberate presentation of opposing ideas which exist at the same time, in the world, in the person, in our souls.

Merrill C Tenney, a Bible commentator, put the paradoxes of Christ’s life in this way:

Although he was virtuous, Jesus suffered all possible indignities; majestic, he died in ignominy; powerful, he expired in weakness...He claimed to possess the water of life, and he died thirsting. He claimed to be the light of the world, and he died in darkness. He claimed to be the Good Shepherd, and he died in the fangs of wolves. He claimed to be the truth, and he was crucified as an imposter. He claimed to be the resurrection and the life and he expired sooner than most victims of crucifixion usually did, so that Pilate was amazed...(John: The Gospel of Belief, p 52)

Jesus’ entire life was a profound and living contradiction and paradox. But that is the way it was meant to be. So often when we are presented with a paradox, or a contradictory statement, in the modern world, we see it as a call to choose a side, to conform ourselves to whatever is for or against whatever it is we are faced with. But to choose a side when faced with a paradox is to lose the opportunity to find deeper truths about our souls and our journeys upon this earthly plane.

Following Jesus means to be continually confronted with paradoxes of living out our faith. Here are some of the paradoxes the faith asks of us:

*We only know freedom by giving ourselves wholly over to Jesus
We are created beings, completely dependent on God, and yet we have free will
We gain our lives by losing them
We are exalted with Christ before God by becoming humble and embracing humility*

The defining rock band of my generation, Generation X, was Nirvana, headed up by the unbelievably talented Kurt Cobain. The song of our generation is likely *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, from the Nevermind album, their second album released in 1991. The other hit song off that album is *Come As You Are*. It is a song full of paradoxes.

Come as you are, as you were

As I want you to be

As a friend, as a friend

As an known enemy

Take your time, hurry up

The choice is yours, don't be late

Human beings do not handle paradox well. Kurt Cobain didn't either. The paradox of being a great songwriter and the fame it created for him was too much. He took his own life in April of 1994.

When confronted with paradoxes, we choose a side, and then we seek all kinds of justifications for why our side is the right one. It is a powerful act of the soul to stand within the tensions of paradox. This is what Jesus wants us to do, and it is what he wanted with the people on the hillside during the Sermon on the Mount.

The reason Jesus wants us to stand with the paradoxes is because, once we allow the paradox to work on us, the paradox will deconstruct how we understand the world. Then, the door of the soul opens a little bit and we perceive that the world is not only different than it appears, but the world is also far more vast than the ways we have constructed our realities.

How do we understand Jesus' paradoxical Sermon on the Mount in our world today?

I think it is important to recognize that the Beatitudes have a fundamentally political desire behind them. At least here, in the Sermon on the Mount, **the political is the gateway to the spiritual**. Jesus is providing a direct challenge to the empire of the day.

Does it still work today?

Jesus begins with *Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God*. He sets up the paradox with *Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation*.

Think about this: We live in a country that, since its inception, has sought to provide the opportunity for wealth for its citizens (recognizing that 'citizen' and the rights afforded her or him has been a constantly evolving situation in this country). And yet, at least today, the fall-out from the drive to wealth is catastrophic.

Did you know the homeless rate in San Francisco is accelerating by 20% a year?¹ There are whole parks in San Francisco that are now homeless encampments. The same is true in Los Angeles. I saw the same thing in Baltimore when I was there in December and January. The great secret of our currently fantastic unemployment rate is that none of those jobs are sustainable for a family. Most of those jobs pay just above minimum wage. Most of the people who have them have at least two of those jobs, and therefore never see their children. They live in subsidized housing and are a paycheck away from total disaster and homelessness. In Rockland, virtually none of the people who serve you in the restaurants and stores in town can live in Rockland, because the housing has priced them out.

It is a deeply disturbing paradox, isn't it? The wealth of the nation that allowed for Rockland's 'gentrification' is also the cause of the housing crisis now faced by the people who work to serve those who have moved here. Our consolation is at the expense of the Kingdom of God. The same was true in the Roman Empire of Jesus' day. The political paradox here is meant to crack us open. An argument could be made that Jesus just presenting this paradox led to the deconstruction of the Roman Empire.

This doesn't even address the soulful aspect of what it means to be spiritually impoverished.

We can go through each of the Beatitudes and do the same thing. Let's do a spiritual read of the paradox presented by *Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh*, which is presented opposite *Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep*.

Even with what I said above about the homeless situation in this country, we live in what is probably the safest, healthiest, least violent times in human history.² By all measures, as a percentage and as a number, fewer people die or are victims of violent crime than at any other time of recorded history. By all measures, more people are rising out of poverty than at any other time in history; not just a little, but significantly. Put another way, fewer people are severely impoverished or hungry than at any other time in history. Eliminating disease around the planet through clean water, vaccination, and better nutrition has raised the age at which people die significantly.

And yet, in my personal sense and observation, a profound sadness permeates this world, our world. Sadness is a decidedly weak word for the despairing, heart-sick, grief-stricken sense that so many of us walk around with, holding this sense close to ourselves and enveloping us in

¹ There are multiple sources for this. Here are two:

<https://www.businessinsider.com/san-francisco-homelessness-cruel-un-human-rights-report-2018-10>;
<https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/homeless-crisis-los-angeles-skid-row-portland-san-diego-seattle/4/>

² Again, there are multiple sources for this. Here is one from 5 years ago:

<https://www.vox.com/2014/11/24/7272929/global-poverty-health-crime-literacy-good-news>

loneliness. Loneliness is a side effect of the sense that “I” am the only one who feels this way about whatever it is that we are feeling.

What causes us to weep in a world that appears to be getting better?

I don't have a good answer for that, but Scripture suggests that the world is always ending, that Christ is always almost returning. The sense of loss is profound in knowing this. What was meant to be a beautiful creation seems at times to be decelerating and decaying. Certainly, at the environmental level we are told this all the time. The ice caps are melting. Eskimos are having to leave their ancient lands because the sea levels have forced them out. The permafrost layers are thawing in Siberia and in the Lapland areas. Irradiated fish from the Fukushima nuclear disaster are now being caught off the coast of California and Washington state.

Perhaps those of us who weep know that a beautiful thing is going away, that the beautiful things that are still here - the majestic creatures, the creepy crawly things, the bizarre deep sea creatures, the many birds and their songs, the flowing fields and forests - seem to be dissolving and disappearing before our eyes. Scientists call it the Anthropocene Extinction Event, where Anthropocene means 'human-caused'. It is likely that the things of creation are always going away in some way. And for those of us who weep for it, we see a world that wants to continually run in the same way it always has. To those who weep, it is as if the governments of the world, the corporations of the world, the rich of the world laugh in the face of that which makes us weep. From our perspective, nothing really matters to them. They keep on keeping on, as Stevie Wonder says in his song, Higher Ground. But they, those beholden to government, corporations, and wealth will weep when the ending takes everything away from them. The promise for those who weep is in our communion and community with God and Christ and one another.

Jesus is paraphrasing Psalm 137 when he speaks of those who weep:

126 *When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.*

2 *Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them.*

3 *The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad.*

4 *Turn again our captivity, O Lord, as the streams in the south.*

5 *They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.*

6 *He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.*

Only by standing in the paradox of weeping and laughter can we perceive cracks in the presumed order of things so that we can act out of the love of God and Christ and continually share the memory and promise of God's good creation.

Living in the paradox of the faith is a high risk venture, though. Paul says,

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then also those who have died in Christ have perished (for nothing). If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people to be most pitied. (1 Cor 15)

Everything, in other words, depends upon Christ's resurrection. Paul has raised the stakes to a phenomenally high level. Paul knows that there are better spiritual systems for living on this earth, in this world. Paul knows that if your desire is to be wealthy, to be well-fed, to be happy, to have the world speak well of you in this world there are plenty of great teachers to follow for those things. And worse, if it is shown somehow that Christ was never resurrected, our seeking after things other than this world, we are to be pitied and held up as the great negative example of history. Our epitaph as Christians will read, *"Those who believe stupid things die stupidly and will only be remembered by this epitaph."*

At the end of Peter Panagore's book *Heaven is Beautiful*, he says an interesting thing. After a deacon in his church asked how he survived all the turmoil in the church without losing faith, Peter preached for the first time on his Near Death Experience. What he told the congregation was, *"I have no faith. I don't believe in God."* The reason he said this is because he had a direct experience of God. One of the great paradoxes of faith is that we believe in what we have not seen. Hebrews 11:1 says, *faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

But what happens when you have seen? What happens when you meet God face to face, and survive to tell about it? Well, now something else is going on than faith. Something else is going on than belief.

For Peter, having encountered God directly on the side of the mountain, the difficulty now is *how do I live in this world knowing without a doubt about the greater world in which we exist. What is belief when I have seen what I once only believed? Is faith and belief even necessary then?*

Paul put it this way, *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.* Paul, on the Damascus road, had a profound, direct encounter with Jesus Christ. It radically altered his life, and ours as well.

Living in this world means being continually confronted with paradoxes. As long as we are here, and the deeper our relationship with God becomes, the larger the paradoxes loom. If we allow the paradoxes to be present, rather than collapsing them by choosing a side, cracks will begin to appear in what we call 'reality'. The light that shines through those cracks are our direct experience with God and Christ, our Damascus road experience. In that light, God and Christ are affirmed and confirmed for us. As Psalm 36 says, *For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light.* In the light of God and Christ, the personal becomes universal; the next world becomes a mirror of this world, or is it the other way around?; love encompasses hate; rage is transmuted into the creative power of God; the human becomes divine.

We become the paradox, with God and with Christ.

Amen.