

February 11, 2007

Psalm 1; Luke 6:17-26

Sermon: "Life Is a Reality Check"

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Text: "*Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place.*"

For those of you who are into photography, there's an old story that's been told in a variety of ways. It goes something like this: Two photographers are talking together and one is recounting his experience in the war-torn Middle East. He says, "In the midst of a bombed-out village, I came across this poor, battered, starving woman who had her hands stretched out, begging, 'Please sir, can you help me?'"

"Did you give her anything?" the other man asked.

"You bet," he replied. "I gave her 1/100 of a second at f/16, and the picture was fantastic!"

What's going on, here? Can he possibly be so consumed with one reality that the thing that is 'really real' – the starving woman right in front of him – is not real enough to move him to compassion?

Fortunately, my story is just made up, but it tells of a reality that is, unfortunately, all too real. Every time you and I gather as Christians for worship, that is the question that is on the table for discussion. What is real? Don't be too content with what you think is real, because the world as it appears before your eyes may be more shadow than truth.

In his book *The Road Less Traveled* M. Scott Peck says, "The good life consists of a lifelong dedication to the pursuit of reality, at all costs."

Ever have someone say to you, because you're a Christian, "Why don't you get real?" To the world, much of what you and I do as Christians seems to be out of touch with reality. Somehow, not a part of "the real world."

This is the point of view that says things like, "You know, you religious types need to get off this 'pie-in-the-sky' nonsense and just face the facts." Or, as one person said to me in recent times about our building program, "Well, prayer is okay, I guess, if

you want to do it; but, you're not going put that building up on prayer. You need a dose of reality."

But that begs the previous question: "Who gets to decide what is really real and what is not so real?" Who gets to define the facts of life?

You and I can only live in the world that we can see. So debates about what's real and what's not real are really just arguments about what we see. What's going on? Who's in charge? Why are we here? Where are we heading?

Enter Jesus. Jesus comes down on a level place (some Bibles call it a *plain*) and he begins to preach. Now, you may think you've heard this sermon before, in Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount. But this one's a little different in Luke's Gospel. Actually, significantly different.

You'll notice, at least in the beginning of the sermon, that Jesus doesn't tell us anything that we're supposed to do. Lots of people think that this is the whole purpose of a sermon. To tell us what to do.

“I come to church, and I listen to the preacher preach, and he’s s’pose to tell me what I’m s’pose to do. ‘Straighten up and fly right!’ Turn around and lead a better life. That’s what a sermon’s all about, right?”

But Jesus’ sermon, here, is about people who are ‘blessed.’ And it’s about people who are ‘cursed’: “Woe to you . . .”

Jesus doesn’t tell people what they’re s’pose to do to be blessed. He just announces that certain people are blessed, others are cursed. So the sermon really isn’t about us – who’s in and who’s out; who’s behaving and who’s misbehaving. The sermon is about God.

Jesus’ sermon could have been called “A Sermon on the Nature of God.” According to Jesus, God is the merciful one who is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” Maybe you thought if God is good, then that means that God punishes the wicked and socks it to the ungrateful. Well, think again, Jesus says. It’s easy to be kind to those who are grateful for the kindness that we show to them. It’s easy to do nice things for nice people. But this God of

ours, Jesus says, is different from us. God is kind to the bad and the ungrateful.

In another part of Luke's Gospel you'll find a familiar story about a man and his sons – The Parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus tells of an incredibly gracious and kind father. When the older brother wants to know why in the world the father would throw a huge party for the returning, wayward younger brother, the father says, “We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found!”

Now that's overstating the case a bit. The fact is, the younger brother was not “dead,” he was out on a binge and in the company of loose women. (Most of us would say, “Uh-uh, that ain't dead! No sir!”). And he wasn't “lost.” He didn't forget the way home one day after school. Instead, he ran away from home, took his father's hard-earned money, and headed west for a good time.

Which makes it all the more remarkable that his father is throwing him a huge party. He welcomes home the wicked and

ungrateful son, and really ticks-off the faithful, stay-at-home son, who's been good for the family business. What gives? What is Jesus up to in this parable?

Well, he warns us, saying, "God is kind even to the wicked and the ungrateful." And if you thought the opposite was true – that God is only in the business of punishing the wicked and stringing up the ungrateful, then think again. God's mercy and extravagant forgiveness is exasperating to us, just as it was for the oldest son in the parable. It's exasperating to find out that God doesn't fit our idea of God.

In his sermon on a level place, Jesus is telling us the facts of life, the way things are, the truth about God – what's *really* real about God.

"Blessed are the poor" – the same people that you and I often overlook, and disregard, and despise, and treat as failures because they are an insult to our middle-class American way of life.

"Blessed are the hungry" – the same hungry folks we expect must be lazy, or inept, or they wouldn't be asking for handouts.

You know, that fellow who stands by the off-ramp at the corner of Carowinds and I-77.

“Blessed are those who weep” – the same whiners and complainers who are always acting like they’ve had it worse than anyone else. Know any of them? Sure you do.

“Blessed are you when people hate you” – because you’re abrasive, or ‘holier-than-thou,’ or self-righteous, the way so-called ‘religious people’ often are. Maybe you go so far as to actually take your faith seriously.

God – this God of Jesus’ sermon – actually blesses these types. Even though you and I often curse them. It’s natural.

Then Jesus moves from preachin’ to meddlin.’ I don’t think he took the same course in homiletics that I did. He cusses out the rich, and the content, and the happy, and the morally upright – you know, people like you and me.

But I’m not going to meddle as Jesus meddles. Largely because it’s so close for me that it makes me very uncomfortable. And I suspect it was a shock that day, too, for all those good,

church-going, Bible-believing folks, to see a picture of God that didn't fit their popular image of God.

Just like the other night at Confirmation Class. I brought the large, framed picture of Jesus by Heinrich Hofman that hangs in The Pathfinders Room into the Class – the one where he's kneeling in prayer, looking up to the light above that comes from God. And I realized, suddenly, how very Scandinavian Jesus looks in that picture. That's how Hofman pictured Jesus. That was his popular image of God.

It can be very unsettling for us when we encounter some new reality, some shocking discovery about this God we thought we knew so well. It's about like climbing up out of a deep, dark cave into the blinding light and reality of the sun at midday.

Again, at Confirmation Class the other night we were talking about the importance of prayer for maintaining an ongoing, personal relationship with God. And Julia spoke up, and said, "You know, there are fish that live at the bottom of the ocean (and I began to wonder where we were going with this). And it's so

dark down there that, even though the fish have eyes, they don't work – they've been in the dark so long.”

And I began to see her point. That unless we're willing to stay in constant touch with God through our prayers, and allow the light of his presence to shine on us and open us up to new possibilities that God has prepared for us, we will remain in darkness, and eventually lose our ability to see anything that God wants us to see.

Maybe that's the point of preaching. Not, first of all, to tell us what to do, but to help us to see what we need to see. The acting follows the seeing. Maybe that's why Jesus begins his sermon with a healing miracle (6:18), as a sign that a whole new world is breaking in to the old, old world. A new reality is shining through the darkness where those on the bottom are now brought up to the top, and those who are poor, weeping, and despised are brought to the center of what God is up to in this world.

So today's sermon doesn't tell you to go out and do anything, necessarily, though by implication you may think of something

you need to do. And come to think of it, that's why you and I live as Christians ought to live – not because someone has commanded us to live a certain way, although Jesus does command us to live a certain way. But mostly we live our lives as Christians ought to live, joyfully, expectantly, because we have seen a vision of reality that is different from the vision of reality in the world. And we want to get in step with the way things are, reality, the *really* real, now that we have met up with God in Jesus Christ.

I read a story the other day about a woman who is a cardiac nurse. She assists in the surgery and care of people who have hearts that are seriously sick. Many of her patients don't make it through the complicated and risky surgeries the doctors in her hospital perform. Some of them survive only to have a very difficult time in their lengthy recovery periods. It can be very depressing and difficult work.

“How do you keep going?” the interviewer asked the nurse.

“Walks in the park,” she replied. “I take an hour off for lunch and go for a walk in the park. I see people who are healthy. I see

happy children playing and older people sitting on benches having a great time enjoying the time and talking with one another. And I'm reminded that this is how things were meant to be. This is the real world. It helps me to keep going in very difficult situations.”

Now, some would accuse the woman of actually trying to escape reality; escape the real world. Take a trip into never-never land. But actually the opposite is true. Her walks in the park are realistic engagements with reality. Times when she can take a sober look at things as they were meant to be. And that keeps her going in the shadowy world of the ER, where it's easy to forget that what's really real is life as God intends it.

Let me suggest that that's one of the main reasons why we gather in worship week after week, to be reminded of what's what in the world. To get a vision, to receive a picture of reality now that Jesus has shown us who God really is.

Life is a reality check.