

0321 Road Not Taken Before (Luke 6:20-49)

In today's gospel lesson, as part of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Jesus delivered a lengthy sermon on discipleship. This passage is parallel in many ways to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Some have called it the Sermon on the Plain for the Bible says that, he went down with [His disciples] and stood on a level place. Jesus not only spoke to the disciples but also to a large crowd. And in order for us to understand the meaning of Jesus' sermon, we need to understand the audience. The audience was people who were born to a land that had a long believed tradition that the righteous would prosper and the wicked would suffer the misfortune. Prosperity was believed as a sign of God's blessing, and misfortune as a curse of God. As they grew up they learned the principle of teeth to teeth, eye to eye. The punishment to those who violate the law in a community was believed as a natural consequence. Think about stoning to the woman caught in adultery. Judgment and condemnation of those who had different lifestyles was part of their life. Think about the Pharisee who was praying at the same time with a tax collector, and how he considered himself morally superior than the tax collector. For this audience it was natural to believe that those who are rich, living according to the law, Pharisee, scribes, and priests are the righteous people therefore blessed by God and the rest are not.

Then Jesus appeared and spoke to them "that's not quite true." In fact it is absolutely the opposite. It is not the rich, those who can eat as much as they want, those laughing, and accepted by the society that God blesses. Rather those that are poor, the hungry, the weeping, the rejected now are the ones God blesses. They will be rewarded greatly in the kingdom of God. Luke's favorite themes, concern for the poor, the marginalized, women, and outcasts, continue in this passage. God's word of favor is proclaimed on the poor, hungry, those who weep, and those who are despised. What is new to us in the passage is the woes. Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

This is a new road Jesus introduced to them which was never taken before. Jesus clearly said that God favors the poor, the hungry, the weep and the rejected by the society, just because they are not in a desirable condition God wants his children to be in. I don't know about you, but I have no problem with it. God's blessings more upon those hurting means to me that God is just and righteous. But the trouble for us is "what does this mean to us who are not quite hungry and generally happy and comfortable?" Should we become poor, hungry, weep and rejected in order for us to get God's blessings? I don't think that's what God wants us to do. Rather, woes are upon us when we create such a comfort zone around us that we forget the fact the people are hurting out there and we are called to serve them. Woes are upon us when we forget the fact that privileges carry with it a corresponding responsibility that says "to those to whom much is given, much is expected."

This reminds me of the story that I heard of Danielson family who were Methodists lived in Boston. They had sizable amount of income both from their work and investments. After their youngest graduated from college, the Danielsons decided not to increase their expenses but to remain living out of the minimum and gave the maximum to the charity. They became the major contributor to the Danielson Institute of Boston University. They left considerable amount of money to their church and other organizations. Although they were rich, filled, laughing and accepted, they identified themselves with the poor, hungry, weeping and rejected. They literally practiced Wesleyan stewardship, "earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can." This is certainly for many of us the road not taken before.

The next message of Jesus is on the love of enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, offer the other cheek when being hit, give away expecting nothing in return etc. To those who believed that retaliation was a way to achieve God's justice, Jesus was saying that revenge or violent reaction was not an option. Just as someone said if we all live by the rule of eye to eye and tooth to tooth, then we all will be blind and toothless. The law of retaliation was given in order to ensure the security of the society. The

original purpose was not to punish, but to correct the wrong behaviors. But the history proved that the law of retaliation wasn't quite effective in correcting human behaviors. People didn't learn from it. Rather the law of retaliation tended to create more violence. Jesus said that the believers are not to react to get even, but to act according to the kingdom principles of love, forgiveness and generosity. What Jesus was saying was the only way to correct others behavior is by modeling. "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

What does this mean to us, who seem to get along with others pretty well and seldom being mistreated? But if we think little deeper, we need to admit that we too have get even rule and a problem with loving not quite enemies, cause we don't seem to have an enemy, but those who have difference of opinions or those who hurt us or others? We tend to think it's okay not to be kind to those who are not kind to us. We tend to think that it's okay to mess up with someone that messed up with us. We often have difficulties with God's kindness toward persons whose life-styles don't seem to merit such favor according to our standards. But Jesus says to find the reason to love them in nothing or no one but in God. "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be the children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Rather than hating in response to hatred, our behaviors and relationships are prompted by the God we worship who does not react to get even but acts in love and grace toward all. Jesus himself was the ultimate model of this lifestyle when he gave his life for us while we were yet sinners. Certainly he is taking us to the new road never taken before.

The next message is on judging others. Do not judge, do not condemn, take the log out of your own eye before you see the speck in your neighbor's eye. Before you judge others do self-examination first. Even when you judge others do it with a merciful spirit rather than a critical spirit. As Jesus exhorts us not to judge, condemn or be unforgiving, he gives us a good reason to be merciful. He tells us that we should not judge unmercifully so that we will not be judged unmercifully.

A "critical spirit," is an attitude of criticism and fault-finding, which seeks to tear others down, not the same thing as what is sometimes called "constructive criticism." The only criticism that is ever constructive is that which is expressed in love to "build up," not to tear down. It is always expressed face-to-face, never behind other's back. The person with a critical spirit usually dwells on the negative, seeks for flaws of others rather than good. There is nothing that causes as many problems in our relationship with God as an unforgiving, unloving, and critical attitude toward another person. Certainly very few things do as much damage and cause as much dissension within families, churches and workplaces as a critical tongue and attitude. As Jesus says in the next message "the good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks." As the disciples of Christ we are to show people mercy by responding to their shortcomings with kindness, love, positive words, and forgiveness. If we do, God will treat us in the same way.

After Jesus spoke about discipleship, he emphasized the importance of practicing what they listened from him. He said "Why do you call me "Lord, Lord" and do not do what I tell you?" The bottom line is following Jesus means putting His words into practice. It means doing the will of God as revealed in Jesus. It is not enough to offer God token expressions of our allegiance to God. Being a follower of Jesus Christ means taking His words and putting them into action, specifically in this context, living a generous life, loving our enemies and forgiving and not condemning others, speaking in love. We are called to be his friends that do what he commanded.

Today's gospel passage isn't meant to be easy listening unless we are the poor, or the hungry, or those in mourning, or saintly. Rather it's meant to make us feel uncomfortable. It is Jesus' call to take a journey on the road never taken before. It's meant to make us search our hearts and challenges us to consider what we really believe the gospel to be. And I hope and pray for Christ Church to be a church with people who identify themselves as the poor seeing the needs of their neighbors, recognizing their needs of God and striving to a generous life, living

out of the minimum and giving away the maximum. I hope and pray Christ Church not only to be a community of saints but also of sinners that welcome other sinners practicing forgiveness in the radical grace of God for all without judging or condemning others, remembering God's favor upon us when we were yet sinners. I hope and pray Christ Church to be a church built upon a strong foundation of people who speak only what is useful for building up, encouraging, supporting, harmonizing, and binding all in one spirit in peace. I hope and pray that God would lead us to the road not taken before that we may be ever transformed through that journey.