

“Who are God’s Favorites?”  
Sermon preached by Maureen Smith  
Central Presbyterian Church  
February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007  
Text: Luke 6:17-28

Here’s a question I want you to think about. What was Jesus of Nazareth all about? What was important to him? What did he teach?

I said Jesus of Nazareth, because I want you to focus on Jesus in his years of ministry on earth. For right now, don’t think about what it means that Jesus was the Son of God, or why he died, or how he was resurrected. Of course those are important questions, but when we focus on them too much we can lose Jesus of Nazareth.

As I said once before—thinking of the Apostles Creed—when we jump from “born of the virgin Mary” to “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” we’re missing a lot.

Now here are two follow-up questions. What passages in the Bible do you think best capture Jesus of Nazareth? And whatever your answer, how do you think it compares with what Christians are known for today?

If I were looking for just a few passages to tell what Jesus was all about, I’d think about the parable of the prodigal son, sometimes called the gospel in miniature. I’d think about what Jesus said were the two great commandments, to love God and neighbor. I’d think about Matthew 25, “I was hungry, and you gave me food.” I’d think about the Sermon on the Mount, including the words that are too often forgotten today, “Judge not, that you be not judged.”

Today’s passage, from the Sermon on the Plain in Luke, might also be a good choice. Both in the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, we hear the distinctive voice of Jesus, the radical message. “Love your enemies,” Jesus says in our text in Luke. “Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.”

When Jesus said the two great commandments were to love God and neighbor, he was strongly rooted in his Jewish tradition. Those commandments are straight from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. And Leviticus goes even further. It says love the alien who lives among you. That’s something to think about in these days when there is such strong anti-immigrant feeling, isn’t it?

Jesus went even further. Love your enemies, he said, and as far as I know, nobody before Jesus ever taught anything as radical as that, as challenging or as beautiful. How are we doing—how have Christians ever done—at living up to that?

It's interesting to compare the Sermon on the Mount with the Sermon on the Plain, and the beatitudes in Matthew with the blessings and woes in Luke. Two differences are noteworthy. Matthew has just beatitudes, but Luke pairs the blessings with woes. Blessed are you who are poor. But woe to you who are rich.

Then there is a subtle but important difference in the first beatitude. Matthew has it, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." In Luke it is "Blessed are you who are poor."

Still, the passages are so similar that you have to wonder: Did Jesus give two different sermons, one on a mountain and one on a level place? Or did Matthew and Luke take the same sayings of Jesus and change them just a bit to fit their own themes?

What did Jesus really say: "Blessed are the poor" Or "Blessed are the poor in spirit"? Maybe he said it different ways on different days, or maybe Matthew took the saying about the poor and softened and spiritualized it for his own reasons.

"Blessed" means "happy," or "favored by God." One thing I know for sure is that Jesus was on the side of the poor. Along with loving God and neighbor, and loving your enemy, that would be high on the list of things I would say confidently about Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, but too often today in our public policy and even in our churches the message is the opposite—good news to the rich, bad news to the poor. Save your soul, and embrace the status quo.

Or even worse, we have the prosperity theology that teaches that God pours out blessings, which are understood to include money and possessions, on those who are in God's favor. If people are poor, they must not be God's favorites. What a scandalous distortion of the gospel. No way can you read the Bible, either the Old Testament or the New, and conclude that God's favorites are the rich.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, when I was on my way to church, my brother was watching *Meet the Press*. When he told me about it later, I was so interested that I found the transcript online and wrote down some notes.

One of the guests was Rick Warren, the evangelical pastor who founded the Saddleback Church in California and wrote the hugely popular book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. He has made so much money from his books and videos that he stopped taking a salary from his church, and now he and his wife are reverse tithers, giving away 90 percent of their income and living on 10 percent.

"I don't think it's a sin to be rich," Rick Warren said. "I think it's a sin to die rich."

That impressed me, but here is the quote that impressed me most.

“The church is the body of Christ, and for the last 50 years, the hands and the feet have been amputated. And all we’ve been is a big mouth. And most of the time, we’re known for what we’re against. And frankly I’m tired of that.”

When we hear that, we might be tempted to say, “We’re tired of it, too, but it’s those other Christians he’s talking about. We aren’t like that.” And maybe we aren’t—I don’t think we are, here at Central—but to the extent that this is the public face of Christianity in our culture, it’s a problem for all of us.

In my Christmas letter this year, I included a paragraph about Central, how we’re growing in members and worship attendance, and I added something about working at Project Home, our ministry to homeless families with children. I told of the three-year-old girl I held on my lap, and the mom who was homeless even though she was working two jobs.

I was so struck by the comments I heard back about that. Your church is doing what churches should be doing, my friends said. There is so much hunger in our culture, among Christians and among people who don’t even go to church, to see churches showing love and being on the side of those who need help.

So if we’re going to follow Jesus and be on the side of the poor, how are we going to do it? A few verses later in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says, “Give to everyone who begs from you,” but in fact our policy at Central is not to give cash to people who come asking for it, because if we did we’d be deluged. Figuring out how to be on the side of the poor isn’t always easy or clear-cut.

A few weeks ago in the adult Bible study, we were talking about the words of John the Baptist—very similar to the words of Jesus—“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none.” That’s Christianity 101, Ed Williamson said. And it is Christianity 101, isn’t it? And yet—I don’t know about you—but I have more than one winter coat hanging in my closet. When I looked at my closet, I discovered that I even had one winter jacket I didn’t wear last year and hadn’t worn so far this year.

So OK, I took that jacket to Goodwill, and probably there is more that all of us can do, but we aren’t going to make much of a difference as long as we’re acting on our own.

That’s one message that came through to me when I read Rick Warren’s words on *Meet the Press*: We’re all in this together.

He was talking about the split among Protestants between liberals and evangelicals. The liberals took the body and the evangelicals took the soul, he said. Liberals focus on working against injustice, racial inequality, and poverty. Evangelicals focus on personal salvation, personal morality, and the family. And he said, “They’re both right. It’s time for the church to be known for love, not for legalism.” Rick Warren and I might not agree on what are the true family values, or who is included in family, but we agree on that.

Another evangelical leader, Tony Campolo, was in town recently, and he said something similar: It dismays him when Christians focus on other issues and seemingly forget that the Bible has 2,000 verses about helping the poor.

Many of you have heard me talk about my involvement in interfaith dialogue—Jewish-Christian dialogue, Muslim-Christian dialogue. Another dialogue I once was involved in was just as rich and just as important: liberal-evangelical dialogue.

When I was young the big split among Christians was between Catholics and Protestants—which was a problem for me, because I had family members in both camps—and now, wonderfully, that split has been mostly healed. Here at Central we have Catholics who are very welcome members of our faith community.

But the split now is within Protestantism, and it’s dividing so many of our denominations. Newsweek editor Jon Meacham was also on *Meet the Press* on Christmas Eve morning, and he said about the split, “Both sides feel they’re losing.” In my experience, that’s so true, and I’ve also found something else to be true, a line on the video on Presbyterianism we show to new members: “Other things divide us. Mission unites us.”

When people are going to bed hungry, when people in other countries are dying for lack of clean water, when they are plagued with diseases that could be avoided with a vaccine or some mosquito netting, we don’t have to worry about theology when we join with others in helping.

We can do more together than we can do alone. Here at Central, I love it that I can work at Martha’s Closet, I can work at Project Home, and I can do more than I ever could do by myself. I love watching Sandy White at Martha’s Closet, offering a caring heart and a listening ear while she helps low-income women find clothes. At Project Home this year I loved watching Gayle Smith playing with the children when I was her partner one evening, and I loved watching Jan Engeswick hold a little boy’s hand and walk him out to the van in the morning after we’d been overnight hosts together.

A congregation can do more than a person can. Churches working together can do more than any one congregation can. And some of the answers also have to go beyond churches, have to involve societal changes and not just acts of charity.

Project Home is a beautiful ministry, but nobody can feel very good knowing that families are sleeping in the basements of churches. Nobody can feel good knowing that hard-working parents are working two jobs and still can't afford housing for their families. We need to work in our society for affordable housing, and for a livable wage.

We're all in this together. Those who are giving help today may need help tomorrow. We're all in this together, Americans who know we live in the richest country in the history of the world, Christians who know we are called to follow Jesus by being on the side of the poor.

When we work together, we can make a difference. We can make life better for people who are poor and powerless, hungry and homeless. And when we do it, we will also be feeding a hunger in our own hearts and healing a rift in the body of Christ. As Dave sometimes ends his sermons: May it be so. Amen.