

Spirituals & the Beatitudes

A Sermon Expositing Luke 6:17-26

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

I can't decide whether I should be edified or convicted. If you let these words sink into your bones, you can feel a sense that everything just might be alright even when everything isn't alright right now. Man, do I need a dose of that about now, how about you? But I don't know if I should lean on in to that or if I should spend some time leaning in to this other sense I get – the sense that these words might be about me in a way that makes me a little uncomfortable, a little torn up on the inside. I don't like it, but that's what conviction feels like sometimes and conviction is ultimately a good thing, so maybe I should sit there a while.

Swing low sweet chariot. Coming for to carry me home. If you get there before I do, tell all my friends I'm coming too. Coming for to carry me home. You see what I mean? These words are buoyant to the soul, they almost make *me* want to break out in singing. Fortunately for all of us, I've become quite talented at *not singing* so I'll put that talent on display, but you see what I mean. *Steal away. He calls me by the thunder. The trumpet sounds way down in my sanctified soul. Steal away to Jesus.* It's like a little kernel of goodness that just sits defiantly in the midst of a world where hope can be hard to come by – like a *Balm in Gilead*, to mention another.

Spirituals - songs composed by those whose lives were not their own, whose labor was not to their own benefit, whose families were someone else's property, who were bought and sold and enslaved right here in our beloved nation – they dot our liturgy from time to time and rightly so. We're in the business of hope in this place and the history-bathed, molten words of spirituals have the capacity to flow into every area of our existence giving us the sense that on the other side of the struggle; yea, even *within* the struggle there is a peace, there is a joy, there is a hope that cannot be taken. And still I don't know if I should be edified, or convicted.

There is a side to the spirituals that I, by virtue of my identity, can know *about*, but will never fully know in my bones. You see, there is – whether you've known it or not – a message within the spirituals that is hidden away. There is *some* evidence, in fact, that conductors on the Underground Railroad such as Harriet Tubman, William Still, and others used literally *encoded* music to communicate instructions to those they were hoping to convey northward. Travelling shoes, chariots, wheels – if you hear those referenced in song, and if you are privy to the code you can know that somebody is mobilizing, heading out, escaping. *Swing low, sweet chariot* might let one know that someone will soon be near to help with the journey out. A band of angels coming to help from across the Jordan is suspiciously like those committed underground railroad conductors swinging low below the Ohio river.

But of course, even without those literally encoded portions of music, there is still something hidden away in the spirituals. There is a hope that transcends not only the circumstances of the moment, but somehow resigns itself even *in the middle of* such great anguish. “It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake,” says Frederick Douglass, to think that the singing of slaves is a sign of current contentment or even a feeble hope that things will get better. “The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart;” he says, “and he is

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.” The songs themselves are a way through, not to happiness or freedom, just through. But this is what I will never know in my bones.

My heritage stems not from those who sang the songs of course, but from those who overheard them none the wiser to their hidden messages. One can imagine, can’t you, slaveholders, overseers hearing the songs rise in the fields or from the slave quarters and maybe even learning the melodies, humming along, singing a few lines under their breath; all the while never knowing they were singing the songs of their own indictment. That’s the part of slavery’s heritage that belongs to me. Not everyone who will hear this sermon shares that side of the legacy of slavery, but for those of who do, it does us no good to say, “but I didn’t do it.”

No, I didn’t have a hand in slavery and I wasn’t around for Jim Crow either, but the bloodlines that flow into my very veins; the lessons taught by my grandfather’s father and his father and his father and so on have all been bathed in the thinking and the justifications used by those who didn’t even know they were humming away at their own conviction. And my dear friends - and let’s put a fine point on this one - I’m speaking for a moment to my white friends, our history. Matters. Deeply. Look at the evidence around us. BIPOC people suffer disproportionately bad outcomes in every phase of modern life and that got that way somehow. No, we weren’t a part of it back then, but we’re a part of it now. So you see, when I hear the spirituals I can’t decide if I should be edified or convicted.

It’s like reading Luke’s beatitudes, you know? “Blessed are you who are poor, [who are hungry, who weep.]...But woe to you who are rich, [who are full, who are laughing.] I can’t decide whether to be edified or convicted. There have been times in my life, like after losing my employment some years ago – spouse in grad school, for sale sign going up in the yard – when I felt like maybe the “blessed are you” part was especially for me. But my life is reasonably comfortable and I have the capacity to stand so far *outside* of solidarity with those who are really hurting in the world that, I don’t know, maybe it’s woe to me.

Luke didn’t make things any easier when he neglected to spiritualize his beatitudes like Matthew did. Both gospel writers relay these sayings and they’re close enough to each other to think they came from a common source, but not from Mark, which is their most common common source. So wherever these sayings came from, we don’t have the original, but we do know that one gospel writer chose to spiritualize them. “Blessed are you who are poor *in spirit*,” says Matthew. Oh well, yeah. I’ve been sad lots of times, even depressed on occasion. I can see myself in that situation. But Luke makes things profoundly more uncomfortable by setting his blessings and woes in the concrete world. He stopped just shy of giving an Adjusted Gross Income threshold, but “poor” means something real and “rich” means something real for Luke. As do hunger and sorrow. So, am I edified or convicted by Luke’s beatitudes.

The key here is an authentic assessment of where I stand. Those who were “full” in Luke’s day were those who had the ability and the gaul to store up enough resource to make it the year or more than a year and sit on those stores even while others went hungry. Is my security more important to me than someone else’s immediate wellbeing? If so, I may have less to look forward to in the world as God longs for it to be. If I am hungry now, either because that is my natural position *or* because I have shared my way into hunger; then God’s hopes for the world are looking good for me and those who have shared with me. The truth is though, a purely objective and fully informed understanding of where I stand probably isn’t really possible – and ultimately, not really the point. Don’t get me wrong, as we’ve said, there is objectivity in Luke’s beatitudes. There are real world issues at play, just not a certain measuring stick. But the tension itself between “Blessed are you,” and, “Woe to you,” is instructive. If I allow myself to feel the weight of the “woes” and gain a vivid sense of what it means to live in a way that is disappointing to God, or even putrid in the thinking of the prophets, then I am compelled to wonder in what ways I can add measures of hunger, weeping, and poverty to my life. Because we can firmly say that God is not interested in suffering for suffering’s sake we can infer that adding those measures to life doesn’t mean asceticism, but solidarity. What measure of what I have material or otherwise might I be able to go without if it meant some other might go with? Joining someone in their misery will certainly get some misery on me too, but “blessed are you who weep,” especially together.

But in the same way as the weight of the woe draws me toward solidarity, so too does any suffering that comes my way on that account draw me to blessing. Each measure of sacrifice we each make for one another only draws the world that much closer to one that doesn't rely on excess or exploitation in the search for blessing. So am I edified or convicted by Luke's beattitudes? Yes.

But am I edified or convicted by the spirituals? Yes.

Those same people who hummed away at their own conviction not knowing the fullness of the songs they sang are the ones who set the world in which we live in motion and it would be naïve to say that that world came to a complete halt with emancipation or with the civil rights movement or with the conviction of the killers of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery. The legacy of slavery is alive and it's a legacy from which I cannot passively disassociate myself, none of us can *passively* disassociate ourselves. The work before us may ask some of us to do things we'd rather not, to give in ways we don't think we can, to push when it's uncomfortable or when pushed *against*. The woes of the spirituals compel us to do so. But, the "blessed are you's" of the spirituals remind us that liberation for anyone is liberation for everyone. Our willingness to stand in when convicted of our part in the legacy of slavery still alive today and of our role in dismantling it is actually a part of building a world that does not rely on exploitation in the pursuit of blessing for some. In other words, if we heed the call of the woes, then blessed are we all.

Amen.