

Good News to the Poor

Peter Bynum

Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:14-21

When I first began to tell people that I was leaving my law practice to go to seminary, people started coming to me wanting to have all kinds of conversations. One that I remember very well was with a friend from Charlotte who pulled me aside and wanted to talk about a particular verse from scripture. It was Jesus’ teaching that “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”¹ He wanted to know what I thought it meant. It was clear this verse had been eating at him for a while, and I knew why. He was a very wealthy man, and this verse didn’t seem like very good news to him. To be honest, I don’t remember what I said to him. I probably hemmed and hawed about how money is not an evil in itself, but that it tends to do things to people. Looking back, I doubt I gave him much comfort.

One of my main limitations was that scripture really doesn’t give us a whole lot of comfort on the disparity between the rich and the poor. The Gospel of Luke is particularly direct on this issue.² God’s special concern for the poor is signaled right from the beginning, as Mary ponders the birth of Christ in Luke 1. “My soul magnifies the Lord,” she says, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant....He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”³

The point is also clear in the Beatitudes of Jesus, which are included in the gospels of both Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, for example, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”⁴ But in Luke’s version, Jesus says, “Blessed are *you poor*, for *yours* is the kingdom of God.”⁵ In Matthew, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”⁶ In Luke, “Blessed are *you who hunger now*, for *you* shall be satisfied.”⁷

In short, whereas Matthew’s gospel tends to spiritualize or generalize poverty

and hunger, Luke makes them completely and utterly literal. The Lukan Jesus is not talking about spiritual poverty; he is talking about people who *have no money*. The Lukan Jesus is not talking about spiritual hunger or emotional malaise; he is talking about people who haven't eaten a good meal in a week, people who are physically hungry. And note that while Matthew's Jesus seems to be talking about the poor or hungry in spirit as if they were not there ("theirs" is the kingdom of heaven, "they" will be satisfied), in Luke Jesus is talking directly to the people who are suffering. "Blessed are *you*... *yours* is the kingdom of heaven... *you* will be satisfied."

This stuff can be challenging for us to hear, because we are not poor. We just aren't. There may be one or two exceptions, but I would say the vast majority of us—dare I even say 99% of us—are not poor. We might feel poor sometimes, but we are not literally poor. The median household income here in Mount Pleasant is about 56 percent higher than in the rest of the country.⁸ But beyond that, the truth is that even the poorest people in the U.S. and other developed countries "are, by global standards, extraordinarily rich."⁹

Our perception of this fact seems to be clouded. According to a recent study, the average U.S. resident estimates that the median income around the world is about \$20,000 a year. The true figure is about a tenth of that. The average income across the globe is only about \$2,100 per year.¹⁰ In the same way, most Americans assume that they are in the top 37 percent of wage earners around the world. The truth is that the vast majority of Americans are easily in the top 10 percent.¹¹ We are among the elite. We are *not* poor.

I am beginning to feel like my friend was really on to something. Maybe we all need to be a little more nervous about camels and needles' eyes and the fact that the bar of faith could be a little higher for us, given the blessings of money and privilege that have been so graciously bestowed upon us. This seems especially true in light of what Jesus says in this morning's passage from the fourth chapter of Luke. Welcomed home as a boy from the old village who has grown up and is making good, Jesus stands up in the synagogue and is given the scroll of Isaiah's prophecy. He is given license to choose the text, and he turns to the section we now know as Isaiah 58-61. He reads selectively from those verses, saying, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,* ¹⁹*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*"

It would be hard to overstate the importance of this choice. These words from Isaiah are the mission statement of Jesus.¹² How does he come? He comes with the *power* of the Holy Spirit, which has anointed him. Why has he come? He has come "to bring good news to the poor." Not the poor in spirit, not the metaphorically poor, but The Poor. The people who are held captive by economic systems that oppress.

I wish I had more time to catalog the many ways that the gospel of Luke continues to make this point. Luke is the only evangelist to include the story of the poor man Lazarus who gets stepped over and ignored every day by the rich man in purple linen. In the end, when Lazarus dies and his earthly pain is over, he is carried away by angels to join Abraham in heaven. When the rich man dies, he is left to languish in punishment and torment.¹³ Luke is also the only evangelist to include the teaching of Jesus that "from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."¹⁴

Third grade was a long time ago, but I can still remember what happened in Mrs. Womack's class when it was time to go to lunch. Mrs. Womack would go over to her desk and open her drawer to pull out a stack of white, laminated note cards. They were the free lunch tickets. Every day, she would hand them out to the same kids, and most of them were African American. I remember Bertha, whose desk was near mine, always got one. She would get her ticket and then line up right in front of me, and then our class would walk in our single file line down the polished wood hallways of Cone Elementary School to lunch. I carried my metal "Welcome Back Kotter" lunch box with me, and Bertha carried with her the white, laminated symbol of her poverty—a poverty that she was born into—a poverty that she had done nothing to deserve, a problem that she could do nothing to solve.

Matthew Dicks, an elementary school teacher turned novelist, was a lot like Bertha.¹⁵ He didn't really know he was "poor" until he got to Mrs. Laverne's fourth grade class and he was the only kid who got free lunch. Matthew says that once he figured out he was the poor kid in class, his top priority became hiding that fact. "All you want to do when you're poor like that," he said, "is to not let anyone else know. So you develop strategies to hide your [poverty] from the people around you." So when the Boy Scouts went camping, for example, he took newspaper with him. His sleeping bag was not heavy enough for winter camping, but he knew that homeless people would sometimes stuff their clothing with newspaper to increase the insulation. He told the other Scouts that he just wanted to read the sports pages. Then, when they went to sleep, he would roll the paper into balls and stuff them into his bag to keep warm.

"It wasn't so bad," he said. "I viewed poverty as an adventure. It was a challenge. It was constantly trying to figure out a way to get through and succeed."

And then one day Matthew and his friend Peter were riding bicycles back to Matthew's house after school. They liked to race on their bikes, and those races were always close and competitive. But That day was different, because Peter had just gotten a new 10-speed bike. Matthew still had his old, rusty, iron Huffy that probably weighed about 60 pounds. As the two friends raced home, Peter quickly pulled ahead. Within 30 seconds, Peter had a 50-yard lead. Matthew dug in and starting pedaling harder—harder than he ever had before. His heart was pounding out of his chest. But it didn't seem to matter. He just could not catch up. And Matthew couldn't help but notice that Peter didn't really seem to be trying all that hard. He was beating him handily, and barely breaking a sweat.

"Up until that point," Matthew said, "I had had this idealized version of life, where effort, intelligence, and creativity and hard work will always overcome whatever material lacking you might have, whatever money you're lacking. But as I watched Peter go away, I realized that my problem was money. I was never going to own a 10-speed bike, and I was never going to catch Peter again. And I cried the whole ride home."

The Spirit has anointed me, Jesus says, to bring good news to the poor... to seek out those who are trapped by circumstances beyond their control, and to do the work that is necessary to set them free. We say we are "a missional church," and it is true that we do some wonderful work for others in Christ's name. We really do. But when Jesus opened the scroll and read his missional statement in Nazareth, he gave us a question that every disciple must ask of him or herself: Am I good news for the poor?

Is my life good news to people who are hungry or homeless? Am I really paying attention to the circumstances that condemn people to poverty and policies that hold them there? Am I being honest with myself and others about the advantages that I have had, advantages that start out as Welcome Back Kotter lunchboxes and 10-speed bikes, but multiply later into college educations, free access to markets and jobs, the ability to get a loan on a handshake. To be a disciple of Christ is to be sensitive to the ways that some of God's people are being unfairly treated and oppressed, and bold in following Jesus into the work of setting them free, to not only *speak* good news to the poor, but to *be* good news to the poor.

"What do you think?" my nervous friend wanted to know. "Is it really impossible for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of God?"

No, it is not impossible. Jesus himself says that while we cannot imagine how a camel can go through the eye of a needle, "what is impossible for mortals is possible for God." At the same time, Christ is very clear about his mission, and he leaves little room for us to talk ourselves around the core challenge of that mission. Christ is firmly on the side of those who do not hold worldly power, who do not have worldly wealth, who are held captive by unjust circumstances they cannot control. To join with Christ is to join with them. May God give us the desire, the will, and the courage to be good news to the poor.

Notes

- 1 Luke 18:25.
- 2 R. Allen Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Luke - John (Volume 9)* Leander E. Keck, ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996), 105.
- 3 Luke 1:46-53.
- 4 Matthew 5:3.
- 5 Luke 6:20b.
- 6 Matthew 5:6.
- 7 Luke 6:21.
- 8 U.S. Census data, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.
- 9 Gautam Nair, "Most Americans vastly underestimate how rich they are compared with the rest of the world. Does it matter?" www.washingtonpost.com, August 23, 2018.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Earnest Hess, "Homiletical Perspective" on Luke 4:14-21, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 287.
- 13 Luke 16:19-31.
- 14 Luke 12:48.
- 15 Matthew Dicks's story comes from https://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=4280.