

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I was reminded this week that our Gospel reading this morning was the Gospel text for my seminary graduation almost 32 years ago, and that the preacher for the graduation service was the famous Lutheran New Testament Scholar and former bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl. This text was a sobering choice for a room full of future pastors, and Bishop Stendahl made sure we got the full brunt of its meaning by focusing his sermon on the last few verses, the “woes.” Only he had this rather thick Swedish accent, and he pronounced it “veh.” “Veh to you who are rich,” he said, “Veh to you who are full,” and so on. It took a minute to figure out what on earth he was talking about. But when I did, I took his point. His concern was to warn us against conforming the radical message of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ways of the world, against deemphasizing forgiveness of sins in order to avoid looking too closely at all of the ways that good, respectable church people like us are complicit with the evils in the world around us. He wanted to caution us against the tendency that middle-class churches have of limiting their contact with the poor and marginalized. He wanted to alert us to the dangers of preaching a watered-down gospel in order to not make our congregations uncomfortable, of seeking their approval at the expense of faithfulness to our calling. The sermon troubled me, and I’m pretty sure that was his point. We should have been at least a little troubled as were setting out to be pastors in Christ’s church. So, I guess that’s why I took some comfort in the fact that I was heading off to graduate school, and not into the parish. But his words stuck with me, and I remembered them when I eventually did become a parish pastor.

Trouble is one way to look at this story of Jesus, his disciples, and the crowd. In fact, the word crowd in Greek can in some contexts mean “trouble” or “disturbance,” probably because crowds were often associated with unrest of some kind. In fact, when the text here talks about those “troubled by demons,” in v. 18, the root of that word “troubled” is the word “crowd.” But you don’t even need to know that to figure out that this crowd of people, this multitude who came looking for Jesus from all over the place, from Tyre and Sidon way up in the north to Jerusalem and Judea way down in the south, was a sign of trouble – a sign that all was not right in the world, that the world as it is is not the world as it is meant to be. That much, I think, is obvious to even the most casual reader or hearer of this passage. But on top of that, in the culture of this time and place it was considered shameful to be afflicted by disease and demons. There was a sense that if you were sick you had done something to deserve it. In some cases, like that of leprosy, such people were literally outcast – force to live on the margins of settled areas and not interact with healthy people. Quarantine is another word for that, and maybe there’s something in our own time and place that also sees quarantining as shameful. Maybe that has been a factor in the resistance to public health measures against the COVID epidemic.

So this crowd, this multitude of sick and possessed people, means trouble. That’s the first thing I want you to notice here. And how does Jesus respond to trouble? He comes right down into the midst of it. That’s the second thing I want you to notice. In the verses before our passage begins, Jesus had been up on a mountain praying, as was his custom. And this time, his followers come to him, and from their number he chose the 12 disciples. You may know that there are two places in the Gospels where the Beatitudes appear, those “blessed are they” sayings of Jesus, in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. In Matthew they take place on the mountain, from which we get the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke the action starts on the mountain, but then

quickly moves down on to a “level place.” So there is no Sermon on the Mount in Luke. It’s a Sermon on the Plain, which somehow doesn’t quite have the same ring to it. But it is significant, I think, of God sending down Jesus into our troubled world. So Jesus comes down into the troubled crowd, heals people’s illnesses, and casts out their demons. Then come the Beatitudes. And the Beatitudes redefine the conventional wisdom about the trouble all around them. One scholar I consulted says that in the honor/shame culture of the Ancient Near East, one connotation of “blessed” here is “honorable.” “It is honorable to be poor,” Jesus insists, “not shameful as you have been told.” It is honorable to weep and to mourn. It is honorable to be hated and reviled, excluded and defamed for caring about the people the world ignores, for valuing people the world deems worthless, because God cares about them and values them too, so you’re in good company.

But then come the woes, the third thing I want you to notice – those warnings of Jesus that Bishop Stendahl troubled us graduating seminarians with so many years ago. If you are not troubled by the world as it is, if you are not troubled by all of these troubled people around us here, Jesus tells his disciples, then that is trouble for you. Because it means that you are part of the problem, a contributor to the trouble that others are forced to endure. Again, in the honor/shame culture of this time and place Jesus is say that there is something shameless about being full when others are hungry, something shameless about having more possessions that you need while others lack the bare necessities, something shameless about being comfortable with the status quo that works to your advantage while disadvantaging others. Would we dare to admit the same thing about our own time and place? Would we dare to acknowledge that the “woes” here describe us better than the Beatitudes? Would we dare to recognize that we are implicated in the world’s troubles and that we might be in trouble with God because of all this?

Without the gospel, we wouldn’t dare – we *couldn’t* dare. Because that would spell our doom. But the good news is that Jesus comes down into this deadly trouble of *ours* too, takes our trouble upon himself, and bears it to the cross “for us and for our salvation” as we say in the Creed, conquering the power of sin, death, and evil. Because of the gospel – this gospel – we can have the courage to face the worst about ourselves and, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can have a change of heart that leads to a change in our priorities and takes our focus away from ourselves and puts it on the troubled world around us. Called by Jesus in Holy Baptism and trusting in his promise of life, we follow him down a mountain of blessing on to a plain of trouble, trusting that he is with us to bless and redeem the world that God loves so deeply in and through him.

May God grant us grace to so trust and follow Jesus. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.