

Blessed are the who?

*Matthew 5:1-12; Luke
6:17-26*

*Year C Epiphany 6 ; Year A
Epiphany 4 ; Year B All
Saints Day (Catholic)*

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4
●	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	●	▲	●	●
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲	■	●	▲
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲	▲	▲	▲
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲	▲	▲	▲
▲	Jesus		▲	▲	▲

Scene 1

James , John , Judas , Matthew

Matthew Is it true?

Judas You heard it here first.

John Is what true?

James Tomorrow night, we'll be sleeping in real beds under a roof!

John Wow, what's the occasion?

Judas We're going into the city, and we have some friends there who are going to put us up.

James Rich friends!

Matthew *[disapprovingly]* Really? We're going to abandon the poor in the villages to hobnob with the rich in their cities?

James *[angrily]* Since when do you care about the poor? You spent your life fleecing them! For the Romans.

Judas *[humorously, but still with a harsh edge]* That's not entirely fair. He probably fleeced the rich just as badly.

Matthew *[meekly]* You're right, I sinned terribly against all the people. But I've put that life behind me now.

John *[warmly to Matthew]* We know. And we're glad you joined us. *[to the others]* But I'm curious, too. Are we changing the focus of our ministry? It seems a little unlike the rabbi.

Judas This is just a detour. And it was actually my idea. I suggested that we should occasionally appear in the cities, just to broaden our base, and he agreed.

Matthew Well, one thing I'll be glad about is to walk on level ground again.

James I hate to admit it, but I'm with Matthew on that. I don't mind ministering to the poor, but why do they always have to live in the hills?

John Because the rich get first pick on where to live, and nobody wants to walk up and down mountain paths all day.

Judas *[as a joke]* Maybe someday, the Romans will extend their roads right up into the mountains, and it'll suddenly become easy to live there as long as you have a horse-drawn carriage and a servant to drive you, and the rich will buy up all the mountain property for the great views and force the poor down into the flatlands!

Scene 2

James , Jesus , John , Judas , Matthew

{The next day as they prepare to enter the city.}

James Is everything set?

Judas Yup, it's all arranged. We're going to gather on a large plain to the south of the city.

Matthew We're meeting outdoors? Why not someplace in the city?

John I thought we were planning on using the synagogue. Did we get turned away from another one?

Judas *[excitedly]* We outgrew it! I've been receiving messages all morning. People will be coming from all over the region, some from as far away as Tyre and Sidon. And many from Jerusalem.

James That's amazing! How do they even know to come?

Judas I got the word out. I've been waiting for an opportunity like this!

{Jesus walks by.}

John Rabbi! Rabbi, did you hear?

Jesus About the big crowd? Yes, I'm looking forward to it, though I hope we'll have enough food for everybody.

James Wait a minute. We were planning on a small and well-to-do crowd, but now we're going to have a mob. If we end up having to feed them, the expense could exceed any donations we get. We could lose money on this!

Judas Don't worry, it's definitely going to be an upscale crowd. Who else could afford to take the day off to travel all the way from Jerusalem or the coast for something like this?

John People who own carriages.

Judas Exactly! This is going to be an enormous opportunity to raise money and gain important friends. We might never get a chance like this again!

James In that case...Rabbi? Can I ask you something about your sermon?

Jesus Certainly.

James Were you planning on giving the same sermon you've been using in the villages?

Jesus Sure, why not? I think it's been going over very well.

James Of course it has - to the poor folk in the villages. It starts off, "Blessed are the poor!"

Matthew And what's so wrong with that?

Judas *[jumping in]* Nothing - when you're preaching to the poor. *[to James]* I see your point. *[to everybody]* That sermon was intended to comfort the poor. "Blessed are the poor," "blessed are the hungry," "blessed are those who weep." Well, I'm sure the rich weep from time to time as well, but they're just not going to identify with the rest of it.

Matthew Why should we care if they do? There's no hope for the rich, anyway. They don't want to hear the truth about anything. All they'll want to hear is "blessed are the rich," so they can stay the way they are.

Jesus What do you think, John? Should I change my sermon?

John To be honest, I've always had questions about it. Sometimes, it sounds to me like *only* the poor are going to inherit the Kingdom, as if your wealth or lack of wealth were more important than your character. I know you're not saying that, but that's how the sermon comes out sometimes.

James I never thought about it that way before. Rabbi, if that's what you're saying, maybe the sermon really does need fixing, no matter who the crowd is.

Judas *[impatiently trying to avoid a long tangent]* The old sermon is fine, but James' original point still stands. It's just not the best one for this crowd. A sermon can be perfectly true and perfectly good, but still not ideal for a given audience, right? I mean, the truth is big; it has lots of facets. We just need to find a better one to show this crowd.

Jesus *[after some thought]* All right. Any suggestions?

{A long silence while they think it over.}

- John** Well, I'd like it to focus more on spiritual qualities, but it wouldn't have to change all that much. How about instead of "the poor", it's "the poor in spirit"? That's the truer formula, anyway, isn't it?
- James** That's great! I've known lots of poor people who were jerks, and I'm sure there are genuinely good rich people. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" is perfect!
- Judas** And the "blessed are the hungry?" How about, "blessed are those who hunger after - I don't know, God? Righteousness? Justice?"
- Matthew** I have to admit, I like that.
- John** Since we're fiddling with things, I'd also like to change the line about those who weep. I know there's nothing specific to the poor about weeping, but the "for you will laugh" part also bothered me a little. In some ears, especially in the ears of a poor person who's been beaten down by society, it might sound like, "you'll get your revenge, you'll be on top some day crushing those who are crushing you now."
- Matthew** But they will!
- James** Maybe they will, but that might not be a good thing to threaten a wealthy audience with. How about, "for they will be comforted?"
- Judas** Perfect! And really, much more in the spirit of a ministry that also includes healing. Though I don't expect this crowd will need as much of that.
- Jesus** This is wonderful! I want to thank you all for opening my eyes to the possibilities. I hadn't thought about the idea that different groups might require different sermons. And this new version has real possibilities. I can turn it into a litany of desirable spiritual qualities. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, and so forth and so on.
- John** I can't wait to hear it!
- Jesus** And I can go further. The original sermon can be sharpened, so that it speaks to the needs of *its* ideal audience even more powerfully. This is much better than having the same middling sermon for both the rich and the poor.

Judas I'm more excited about tomorrow than ever! This is a day that can establish us for the long haul, that can fuel our ministry until its end.

Jesus Blessed are you who long for the fulfillment of God's design, for there is nothing under Heaven that can prevent it!

Scene 3

James , Jesus , John , Judas , Matthew

{The day of the big sermon. Jesus preaches to a huge crowd outside the city.}

James What a crowd! *[to Judas]* I said it before and I'll say it again: you're a great organizer!

Judas It's not me, but the sermon that's going to make or break us, and you're the one who had the foresight to ask him to change it. It didn't even occur to me!

Matthew *[angrily]* Look at all these decadent leeches. I can't believe we're going to kowtow to them. We should be condemning them for their sins!

James *[annoyed]* Weren't *you* a decadent leech once upon a time not too long ago?

Matthew *[humbled]* True.

John *[gently to Matthew]* What was it that turned you around? What drew you to the rabbi? Was it a sermon blasting you for being a tax collector, or a sermon more like the one he's about to preach?

Matthew *[with a laugh]* It was the latter, of course.

James Shhh! He's about to start.

Jesus *[in a loud preaching voice to the crowd]* Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God!

Judas He forgot to say "in spirit!"

Jesus Blessed are those who hunger, for they will be filled!

James He got that one wrong, too!

Jesus Blessed are those who weep, for they will laugh!

John He's not getting it wrong. He's not doing it!

Jesus Blessed are you when people hate you and call you evil for my sake, for so they treated the prophets. Rejoice and be glad on that day, for your reward in Heaven will be great.

Matthew *[calling out]* Amen!

James *[thinking the sermon is over]* Well, that was -

Jesus *[continuing the sermon]* But woe to you who are rich!

{The crowd gasps in shock.}

Judas What?

Jesus For you have already received your comfort. And woe to you who are well fed, for you will go hungry!

James He never said that before, even in the old sermon!

Jesus Woe to you who laugh, for you will weep!

John *[in wonder and sudden comprehension]* He "sharpened" it! Like he said he would.

Jesus And woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how your ancestors treated the *false* prophets!

Matthew Amen! Preach it! Hallelujah!

Scene 4

James , Jesus , John , Judas , Matthew

{That evening in their camp.}

Judas Well, that was a disaster.

James Not only did he preach the wrong sermon, he added all that "woe to the rich" stuff that made it even worse!

Matthew How did we do with the donations?

James *[angrily]* What do you care? I saw you with your Amens and Hallelujahs. You didn't care how we were going to do; you just wanted to see the crowd condemned!

John *[trying to diffuse the conflict by returning to question]* How *did* we do?

Judas Not too bad, actually. Better than usual, ignoring the fact that the crowd was about ten times bigger than usual, and probably ten times richer.

Matthew Did we make any good contacts?

James *[glumly]* I got yelled at by some people who were pretty upset about the sermon, but that was it. Anybody else?

Judas *[dryly]* I was approached by a very enthusiastic young man who wanted to join us. He said his mission in life was to eliminate money from society. I told him to go home.

John Well, at least we received enough donations to continue the work.

Judas We did, but it could have been so much more. We could have set ourselves up for the duration! I don't know what the rabbi was thinking.

{Jesus enters.}

Jesus What I was thinking about what?

James Rabbi!

Matthew *[awkwardly]* Uh, we were just...

John *[awkwardly]* We were just discussing...

Judas *[firmly]* Your sermon. We were discussing your sermon. What happened?

Jesus What do you mean "what happened?"

James Did you forget the new sermon we worked out together?

Jesus How could I forget it? Creating it together like that was a wonderful experience, don't you think?

John It was. But are you never going to use it with a real audience, then?

Jesus Of course I am. If I didn't, it would be the waste of a good sermon.

Matthew Then why didn't you use it today?

Jesus I was just following the principle you yourselves taught me, that different audiences require different sermons.

James *[losing his patience]* But that was exactly why we wanted you to change it! The new sermon was the sermon we created for this crowd! The old one was the one you should use for the villages!

Jesus *[mildly]* Well, I got to thinking about that, and decided that the old sermon was more what today's crowd needed to hear. No matter how much cash it might have cost us.

Judas *[relenting a little]* Well, as I was telling the others, we didn't actually do too badly. We'll survive.

Matthew *[with gusto]* And good God, did I love hearing you blast those richies!

Jesus *[earnestly to Matthew]* You know, that might mean that the sermon *you* need to hear more is the new one.

Judas Okay, I get it now. The sermon each person should hear is the one they want to hear the least. Is that it?

Jesus Not all the time, but in this case, yes.

James So the next time we're in the mountains, you're going to preach the new one, the that talks about the poor in spirit instead of the poor?

Jesus Probably.

John Rabbi, if an audience were right in the middle, so that either sermon would be just as good for them, and they'd like - or dislike - either one exactly the same, which sermon would you prefer to preach?

You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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