

“Blessings and Woes”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 17, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Psalm 15

¹O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? ²Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; ³who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; ⁴in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; ⁵who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. ²⁴“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.



Sermon: “Blessings and Woes”

I have to admit that today’s scripture is not an easy one. At least not for most of us. We come to church to be fed spiritually, to receive some Word from God; to learn and to be comforted with the good news of God’s grace, mercy, and steadfast love.

But for many of us in this room, today will be different. Today we hear Jesus speak to God’s favor for people who are largely on the margins; people we would rather not see; people we are sometimes afraid of. Blessed are the poor, Jesus says, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are reviled for the sake of Jesus Christ. Not only that, Jesus says, “Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and who others speak well of.” I don’t want to make too large of an assumption here, but based on my experience, there are more of the latter group here than there are the former.

But those words of Jesus have been handed down to us and so today we will hear them and try to understand them.

People like predictions. Who will win the Super Bowl? What will be the next big cultural fad? Who will be the Democratic nominee for President in 2020? Culturally we seem incapable of just waiting for things to happen and observing them when they do. We like to make our predictions.

But those predictions are usually fairly *uncontroversial*. If you’re a sports fan, then you’ve already started seeing predictions for who will make this year’s NCAA tournaments. You’ll see Duke and Kentucky on the men’s side, and UConn and Notre Dame on the women’s side. But that would be the case just about every year. Nothing controversial there.

But what if the predictions being made were just completely off the wall? What if the experts at ESPN predicted Ohio State will not only make the tournament, but also knock-off all the blue bloods and win it all? What if they predicted the Browns to win the Super Bowl and the New England Patriots to go 0-16 next year?

What would you think if CNN projected all of the prominent candidates for president from the two main parties to *lose* in 2020 and the next President to be from the Green Party or the Libertarian party?

What would you think if Fortune Magazine predicted that in the next year or two, Amazon, Wal-Mart, and General Motors would be dropping out of their Fortune 500 list to be replaced by Ray Ray's Barbecue, Crimson Cup, and the Moo Moo Express Car Wash up by Graceland?

You'd think someone at ESPN or CNN or Forbes had lost their minds. We know how the world works. Those kinds of reversals are not only unlikely, they're impossible.

But that kind of unbelievable reversal is almost exactly what Jesus is talking about in this segment of the sermon on the plain we just read. Blessed are the poor, he says, and the hungry, and those who weep and those who are reviled in his name. And woe to the rich, the full, those who laugh and those who are spoken well of.

He can't be serious, right? I mean, he calls blessed the people who have nothing and declares "woe" on the very people we strive to be! And yet he is absolutely serious.

Now in Matthew's gospel, we find a much softer, friendlier version of this. Matthew's Jesus says "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, and blessed are those who *hunger for righteousness*, etc. And in Matthew's gospel, Jesus doesn't declare "Woe" to anyone. Maybe Jesus gave two different sermons and the one on the high place ("Sermon on the Mount") that Matthew heard was worded a little differently than this one. Or maybe Matthew just wanted to soften Jesus' words a little bit; make them go down a little easier. But here in Luke's gospel, Jesus offers a very pointed assessment of who is favored by God and who is not.

If we're going to make any sense of this, then there are a couple of things we need to understand. First, notice that he is talking to his disciples. He's talking to the insiders; the people who have left everything to follow him and learn from him. He is talking to them about what it means to be a disciple.

Secondly, his words are descriptive, not prescriptive. They are statements of the way things are. It doesn't mean that being poor and hungry and weeping and hated are goals we should strive for. It doesn't mean that we can earn God's blessing by being poor and hungry and weeping and hated. And it doesn't mean that God doesn't love you if you're not poor, hungry, weeping, and hated. But it does mean that there is a soft spot in the divine heart for those of God's children who are poor, hungry, weeping, and hated.

No doubt this is a hard passage because it's almost the exact opposite of how we see the world. The people who are dropping "hashtag blessed" all over their social media accounts, are not folks who are celebrating that they are poor, hungry, weeping, and hated. They are flashing pics of their families and their stuff and their beautifully arranged plates of food. They're celebrating specifically because they *aren't* poor, that they *are* eating well, that they *are* joyful and that they *are* well-loved.

These are the people tweeting out things like "Got backstage passes for Hamilton! #Blessed" and "Found my favorite pumpkin spice muffins at the grocery store this morning! In February! #Blessed." Those people might in fact, be blessed, but that's not the kind of blessing Jesus is talking about here.

You see, part of our problem comes from our misunderstanding of blessing. Somewhere along the way, we began to see stuff and money and the fulfillment of our own wishes and desires as signs that God is with us and loves us. Yes, the Old Testament scriptures talk about harvests and flocks and herds and children being signs of God's blessing.¹ And Job is considered blessed for all of the family and wealth that he has.² But in an odd twist of that, we have come to believe that

if *some* of a thing is a sign of God's favor, then more of that thing must *really* be a sign of God's favor. The people with great wealth and power and privilege, well they must *really* be blessed.

It's a "gospel of prosperity" that says wealth and power and privilege are signs of God's smiling down on us; that if we have a lot of money and stuff, it is on only because God wants us to have a lot of money and stuff. But here, Jesus completely reverses that thinking.

Jesus declares that it is not the wealthy and the powerful who are blessed by God; quite the opposite, actually. Jesus says to the very people we hold up as successful and models to be emulated, "Woe to you." Jesus says to those we want so much to be rich and well-fed and happy and well thought of, "Woe to you!"

It is the poor and the hungry and the grieving and those who are bullied and despised that God favors.

Why? First of all, because even though God put enough resources in the world so that everyone should have enough, we've still found a way to generate a society of haves and have-nots. In grace and abounding love, God has a heart for those of his children who suffer in the midst of plenty.

Secondly, because often those who are poor, hungry, grieving and hated, got that way because they have been victimized by those with power and wealth; those who are well-thought of. God has a heart for the underdog, the victims, those who have been trampled on by a system that is stacked against them.

Third, because God honors those who honor God. We are disciples of Jesus Christ. If we are looked down upon because of that fact; if we are despised because of our faith and the way we have answered God's call to live lives following Christ's example, then so be it.

And finally, because they have nothing else to rely on. For the wealthy, the full, the happy, the well thought of, relying on God for their well-being is a choice. For the poor, the grieving, the hated and reviled, relying on God is a necessity.

Ever notice how easy it is to pray when you're scared? On the night before a big test in school, or when you're going in for a battery of tests at the hospital? And then have you noticed how easy it can be to just forget to pray when things are going pretty smoothly? The old adage "there are no atheists in foxholes" is based on that notion. When we worry, when things are uncertain, when we're fearful, we pray, we lean on God for help and support. But when the crisis passes, we tend to want to stand on our own.

The poor and the hungry and the grieving and the reviled; God has a heart for them because they have gotten the short-end of the stick. God has a heart for them because they have a heart for God.

And here Jesus says that their situation will not remain that way forever.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven..."

Jesus' promise here is that their situation will be reversed. Which is good news for some and bad news for others.

We claim to love Jesus and the United States claims to be a Christian nation, but if Jesus were preaching this message today on Mainstreet, America, he would be derided as a socialist and run out of town. Maybe that's why he was reviled by so many in his own day and maybe that's, at least in part, why the Roman Empire had him put to death.

The point here is not to draw a line between insiders and outsiders; it is not to affirm some and condemn others. And the goal should not be to make ourselves poor and unhappy just to earn God's approval. That's not what this suggests and it's not how God's grace works.

Jesus is speaking of the injustice in this sinful world and the dramatic reversal that has to happen and that will happen as God's Kingdom comes into being. The inequity that we shrug off and dismiss as just the way of the world, Jesus says will not be the way of God's Kingdom.

In God's Kingdom, people will not be subjected to lives of poverty where lack of medical care and education and opportunity sentences them to lives of quiet desperation. In God's Kingdom, people will not be left to scrounge for what they can get in a world that produces an abundance of food. In God's Kingdom those who weep will have others' shoulders to lean on. In the Kingdom of God, people will not oppress one another; nor will they hate or despise one another.

Jesus here declares an affinity and support for the ones we might call the least of these. So, until the Kingdom comes, the question is this: Will we align ourselves with Jesus, our Lord and savior, or will we not? Will we value what he values? Will we love whom he loves? Will we work to help bring in the Kingdom of God that is coming?

Hearing these challenging words of Jesus will probably send most of us into deep self-examination. Am I rich or poor? And am I hungry or full; grieving or laughing? Do I need to ingratiate myself to others so that I'll be well-liked? Can I subject myself to the criticism and harsh words of those who do not respect my faith? Where do I fall in Jesus' accounting of woes and blessings? Which can I expect and what should I do about it?

But Jesus' words are not meant to merely inspire introspection. They are meant to call us to action; to convince us to align ourselves with God's vision of the world. As author Wes Avram writes, "Woe to you if the paradoxical truth of this blessing does not change your way of life! [Because these blessings and woes are] a statement not only about the way things are, but also about how disciples are to live."³

I know these words are hard to hear, and they are hard to preach. But they are Jesus' word to us, and they are part of our gospel call to discipleship.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Deuteronomy 28:1-14, NRSV

² Job 42:12, NRSV

³ Avram, Wes. "Luke 6:17-26 Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture." *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Edit Joel B. Green, et al. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018. 250-251.