

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
February 13th, 2022  
Luke 6: 17-26 - Matthew 5: 1-12

By a show of hands, who here this morning wants to be poor? Who wishes to be hungry? Who among you prefers to be sad? Who here knows what Jesus is talking about in this little litany of blessings and woes?

These blessings and woes are Luke's version of the beatitudes, part of the sermon on the plain, Luke's version of the sermon on the mount. This series of sayings and teachings are full of paradoxical statements about God's kingdom values and what it means to live seeking the kingdom. In terms of Luke's blessing and woes vs Matthew's beatitudes, there are a couple noticeable differences. Matthew does not have the woe section. And Matthew nuances his blessings more. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those that hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the meek. We might more easily discern some kind of spiritual value or trait in Matthew's beatitudes. But Luke is pretty stark. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep.

These are among many statements that might make us pause. In reality, we spend a lot of time avoiding the things blessed here: poverty, hunger (whether metaphorical or literal), mourning and grief, being hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed. Our American values cause us to view these things in a certain way. We believe in upward mobility and working to avoid things like poverty and hunger. We want to be happy, not sad; proud rather than meek, seeking to be the most powerful and praised and included. We don't like loss, or weeping. We don't care for being persecuted.

The crowd Jesus was speaking to had their own cultural background, non-American. Yet, it had its own structure that made one avoid or devalue similar things as well. The law, often spoken of in the gospels, is the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. These contain all sorts of instructions, including the ten commandments down to laws about cleanness and uncleanness, sacrifices, and what to do when a business deal goes south. The law had its own structure for society that cast stigmas on sickness, on skin spots, on a failure to keep the law, whether it be concerning justice, or ritual cleanness. The result is that they too are always avoiding certain things. The law privileged certain experiences and stigmatized others. They too would be prone to see wealth and happiness and a full table as blessings, and poverty and hunger and sadness as the fruit of poor behavior or God's displeasure with us.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were the representations of the ideal. They were male, they were able to enter the temple courts and be in God's presence. They were considered whole, and clean, and in good standing with the law. This is in contrast to the women who could only get so close to the inner courts of the temple. Women had physical cycles that routinely made them unclean. This is in contrast to the lame, and the foreigners who could get only so close to God's presence as well. And the crowds that Jesus is speaking to were filled with those whose lives were marked with stigmatized conditions and things we wouldn't envy. They were further from God's presence, further from God's ideal.

And even at the start of our reading, Jesus is healing and removing from these people the things that separate them from temple worship and from being fully functional in society. These were signs associated with the coming messiah and the power of God's anointed, that he would heal the sick, cure the blind and the lame, and cast out demons. So as word of this spread, this crowd gathers, and Luke writes: "They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup> And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them."

But what does all this seeking of certain things and avoiding of others do to one? What is the cumulative effect of such ways of thinking? These people were now more likely to be considered clean and restored to the temple worship. They were more likely to be received back in families and celebrated in their communities. They are less likely to be relegated to hunger, poverty, and sadness. But it all tends to reinforce a certain structure, a certain hierarchy, a certain energy and seeking of certain realities, and avoiding of others; privileging some and stigmatizing others.

So it is interesting that even as Jesus cures and heals, and fulfills these messianic expectations, he also gathers the crowds and sits them down. He tells them that they are not just blessed because they can be rid of their struggles, or because they can leave certain realities for other ones. They are blessed because of their struggles. They are blessed because of who they are, struggles and predicaments included. They are blessed because of what might be produced in them because of their struggles. Furthermore, Luke includes the woes. So, as we seek to be fat and happy and wealthy, he says woe are such people.

Jesus seems to be trying to disrupt our habitual ways of thinking, avoiding certain experiences and seeking others. I think of the line from Huffstickler's poem that we don't just get over or beyond certain things. Wisdom is seeing how all these experiences form us, seeing the shape of one's whole life. Furthermore, there

seems to be an attempt to redirect what it is that we are seeking. Not just wealth and comfort and laughter, but that our experiences would direct us closer to Christ's kingdom values, to draw us closer to the things that matter most in Christ's eyes. Perhaps that is why he says woe to the rich, and to the laughing and the full stomachs, because they may have no motivation to seek the things of Christ's kingdom.

I think of Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit from his letter to the Galatians. He says the fruit of the Spirit at work in us is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we consider the kind of soil out of which such fruit grows, I can see why Jesus was so hopeful and affirming of the crowd. Certainly, all sorts of experiences, fabulous ones, and disappointing ones are a part of the soil in which we grow. But the struggles and disappointments seed compassion most productively. Things like kindness and love and patience don't get honed when all is going swimmingly.

I wonder if the time spent with these people affected Jesus' perspective and message and how he interpreted the law and taught it. After all, people who have endured challenges and who can talk about them tend to be more interesting to sit and talk with than people who purport to have it all together.

So I wonder, therefore, if Jesus blesses these things for two related reasons. First, because he wants us to know that we are loved, and not just if certain things are true, or if we successfully navigate away from certain things and towards others. But that we are loved, and we are God's children, period. Secondly, these experiences make us more adaptable to the spirit of the law, to the fruit of the Spirit.

Therefore, if we can get beyond our cultural propensities to seek wealth and health and to avoid people and experiences associated with the opposite, perhaps we can achieve a better sense of wholeness, and well-being. Perhaps this is what Jesus learns with his time with the sick, epileptics, paralyzed, poor, and grieving. And after spending his share of time with the religious leaders, the pious, the well-to-do, the proud, and the powerful, I wonder if he sees the seeds of the kingdom more clearly, or more ripe, in these folks because of what they are in touch with. And rather than just avoiding certain circumstances in favor of others, a different type of relationship to God is possible.

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup> “Blessed are you who are hungry now,

for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup> “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup> Rejoice 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.

<sup>24</sup> “But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup> “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.

<sup>26</sup> “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Perhaps, as our poem suggests, Jesus does not want to reinforce the cultural anxieties and norms. He does not want to reinforce the desire to flee and forget certain realities. But as Huffstickler writes, “That things that become part of our experience / never become less a part of our experience.”

“Let the pain be pain,” he writes. “Not in the hope that it will vanish / but in the faith that it will fit in, / find its place in the shape of things.” That these experiences, these things we know might be a part of what leads us to what we are not yet, to what Christ is making us into – people of love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness.

Now, preachers are supposed to be people who walk the walk and not just talk the talk, so therefore, this is a problematic sermon. Because after all, I find myself playing the game, seeking to be like many of you, retired with lots of discretionary time on my hands. I get tired of uncertainty and find myself wishing for a place where loose ends are tied up. I tend to think that the rich are blessed, not the poor. I am tired of wondering and worrying about the future, how we will get kids through college. I am tired of reading about stream and climate conditions and drought even as I’m trying to build a boat.

I too easily become preoccupied in the avoiding of certain realities and seeking of others, with not near enough focus on growing in kingdom values. So you can imagine my disappointment when I realized in the course of writing this sermon that perhaps trying to get through or over such things is not the spiritual work

before me. I am only perpetuating that old mentality of avoiding certain experiences in favor of more pleasant or acceptable ones.

I suppose what Huffstickler would say to people like me, is that there is something in all of this that is becoming part of me, that will never be less a part of my experience. Perhaps there is something in all this that might make me more open to and more desirous of God's kingdom.

Jesus seems to be elevating a different value system, where it is more about giving ourselves to God's kingdom, to growing in the Spirit. And furthermore, Jesus seems to be reinterpreting the law in a way that dignifies people's experiences, and harnesses these experiences that we might learn and grow through them, and that the Spirit might produce in us the fruit of love and joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. And that these fruits of the spirit are not contingent on also having full stomachs and flush bank accounts.

And a life is as natural as a leaf.  
That's what we're looking for:  
not the end of a thing but the shape of it.  
Wisdom is seeing the shape of your life  
without obliterating (getting over) a single  
instant of it.

Perhaps we might end with another show of hands. Who wishes for peace that surpasses understanding? Who wishes for joy that is not contingent on wealth and circumstances? Who wishes to experience the values of Christ's kingdom more than the values of this world? Blessed are you.

And all God's children said...

*Jesus Teaches and Heals*

*(Mt 4:23–25; Mk 1:35–39; Lk 4:44)*

<sup>17</sup> He 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. <sup>18</sup> They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup> And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

*Blessings and Woes*

*(Mt 5:1–12)*

<sup>20</sup> Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup> “Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup> “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup> Rejoice 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.

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