

Blessings and Woes

Luke 6:17-26 Jeremiah 17:5-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I want to spend part of my sermon this morning introducing our assigned lectionary Gospel Reading from Luke 6. This passage, much like the one we just heard a moment ago from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, contains a list of both blessings and woes.

Most of you are probably familiar with the term, the Beatitudes. But most of us are much more familiar with the list of blessings found in the 5th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. I could spend more than an entire sermon exploring the important differences between Matthew and Luke. Like how Matthew states, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," but Luke simply states, "Blessed are the poor," period. There are also important theological reasons why Matthew's version is called the Sermon on the Mount, but Luke locates his story down on a level place, thus called the Sermon on the Plain. But all that would take too much time away from what I would like us to wrestle with today. So, hear now, Luke 6:17-26....

Jesus is telling his disciples, us, what the realm, the kingdom of God is like in our midst. He describes a way of being in the world which reflects the ways that God is in the world. Luke places this story not up on a mountain, often used to represent the place where God is encountered and the law is given. Instead, his version takes place down on a level plain because that represents the real daily life of human existence. It's the place where people struggle to live and where actual ministry takes place among the people.

Jesus' sermon is ultimately about discipleship, about what it means to those of us who seek to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. And, as we learn, that isn't easy. While Matthew lists eight beatitudes, Luke lists only four, which, in turn, are followed by four corresponding and parallel woes, or curses. Before we explore that, let's look briefly at the passage from Jeremiah and how that informs the New Testament Beatitudes.

The central theme in Jeremiah is trust. He basically asks, **'In whom and in what do you place your ultimate trust – your faith?'** He uses descriptive imagery to portray the internal life. Those who trust only in themselves or human institutions are like a small shrub in the hot and dry desert. Those who trust in God are like a vibrant tree growing by clear running water. **Jeremiah's conclusion is this: Blessed are those who are dependent on God rather than dependent on self or others.**

In contrast, Jesus gets much more specific than differentiating between those who trust in God, and those whose sense of self-sufficiency has led them away from their dependence on, and even relationship with God. And Jesus' list of those who are blessed is shocking. For Jesus, blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the persecuted. In parallel, woe to those who are rich, full, laughing, and are spoken well of. In addition to a literal interpretation of the poor, hungry, weeping, and hated, Luke may also be saying: Things are not always what they seem or appear to be. Those who seem to be prospering now may not be in the sight of God. And those who are suffering now are blessed in the sight of God.

Jesus, and therefore the gospel message itself, is so counter-culture. It's such a reverse of what we perceive. Our culture has its own set of beatitudes and woes. They are

deeply ingrained in us from a very early age. Biblical commentator Sarah Dylan offers these:

Blessed are the rich, for they are our major donors. But woe to the poor, for they remind us of our failure to share.

Blessed are the achievers, for we hope we'll become what we envy. But woe to the hungry, for we fear they will disrupt our lunch to beg.

Blessed are the winners, for we hope they'll reward our loyalty. But woe to those who weep, for they remind us of vulnerabilities we try to deny or hide.

Blessed are the strong, for nobody can tell them what to do. But woe to those the world scorns, for this demonstrates that we, unlike they, are insiders.

This is not Jesus' vision for the world as represented in the kingdom of God. That is not the network of relationships in which we can be who God created us to be. So, if this doesn't bring us fulfillment, what can? Dylan shares, **"A good step toward what will fulfill us would be living into the beatitudes, spending our money, our time, and our power, the currency that counts in our culture, on the people Jesus calls blessed – on those whose lack of power keeps them poor, and whose poverty keeps them disempowered and on the margins."**

A word needs to be shared at this point about a biblical understanding of the words, blessed and woe. The Latin word, *beatitudo*, is a translation from the biblical Greek word, *makarios*. It is most often translated into English as 'blessed.' But the word also carries other connotations, such as 'how honorable are those' or, 'we salute those.' You may have also heard this translated as 'how happy are those'. But this is not fitting in this context because of the way we define 'happy' in our culture today.

And the Greek word, *ouai*, translated as 'woe,' can mean 'how shameless are those,' or 'we scorn those'. It can even be translated as 'how cursed (or damned) are those.'

So, which is the most accurate translation for this biblical passage? Many scholars now believe the best translation is the one that connects with that ancient culture which was historically steeped in issues of **honor and shame**. This understanding adds to what it means, for example, to call the poor blessed, and the rich cursed. **For in the biblical context, "poor" and "poverty" were not simply defined in economic terms, as in just having no money. A cultural and social meaning of these terms was also attached.** Let me explain.

Honor was closely related to wealth, and shame was related to the loss of wealth. In the biblical world, wealth and honor were not seen as individual possessions, but rather the property of the family or kinship group. When a family lost wealth, its status and honor were threatened. Although most people in that society had meager possessions and low status, there were families or kinship groups who could no longer maintain their inherited status in regard to marriage contracts, dowries, land tenure, and the like. **Loss of wealth translated into lower status, which meant loss of honor, and therefore, shame. Being "poor," therefore, meant not only having no economic means, but also losing social status and honor. This loss of honor was even more serious than the mere loss of wealth.**

In our own culture today, do we not continue to project shame and a lack of honor onto the poor, hungry, and destitute? Jesus speaks, therefore, about restoring honor to those on whom society projects shame. Through this biblical passage, Dylan continues:

Jesus challenges us to say, 'We honor not those who have the most to give, but those the world honors least. We invest not in those who are most likely to pay us back, but in those the world calls worthless. We salute the losers, the weak, the vulnerable.' And then Jesus challenges us to live it. That's what's going to fulfill us.

As we learn to let go of some of the honor, the wealth, and the power we have so we can invest it freely in the poor, the despised, and the powerless, we become agents of healing for others, and we find healing for parts of ourselves we used to scorn and call shameful in them.

Taking all this a step further, what do Jesus' blessings and woes have to say to those of us who aren't literally poor, hungry, weeping, or despised? Are those with wealth, for example, cursed and outside the realm and kin-dom of God? The short answer, of course, is no. Luke does not mean for his readers to imply that an entire social class is being condemned. Rather, **the woes are addressed to the rich who are apt to be so preoccupied in gaining wealth and acquiring possessions that they fail to respond to God's invitation to discipleship.**

The call to discipleship means that as long as there are people who are poor or despised, we must stand in solidarity with them and do what we can to help. As long as there are people who are hungry, we are hungry, too. If one weeps, we all weep. We must endure whatever hatred and persecution comes our way as we seek justice for those who are still oppressed and excluded. Gustavo Gutierrez, a Central American liberation theologian, has commented:

God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will.

So, I leave you with these questions to think about this week.

- Are you open to God's channels of blessing, or are they being blocked in some way?
- How are you being blessed by the other people in your life?
- How are you living life in a way that becomes a blessing to others?
- How are you and I restoring honor and dignity to those on the margins of society?
- How is this community of faith being a blessing? How are we being a woe?

Let us continue to struggle with and live into the meaning of Jeremiah's words, "Blessed are [we] who trust in the Lord, whose trust is God. [We] shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." – Jeremiah 17:7-8

Blessings, and Amen.

Resources:

Sarah Dylan, *Dylan's lectionary blog*, 2-9-2004.

Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J., *Honoring the Dishonored: The Cultural Edge of Jesus' Beatitudes*.