

***Blessings and Woes- Luke 6:17-26***

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I once heard a story of a man who one day walked into a bookstore to return a purchase. "It's a Bible," he said, handing it to the clerk at the cash register.

"Was it a gift?" asked the clerk. "No, I bought it for myself," he said, "and I made a mistake."

"Didn't you like the translation? Or the format?" "Oh no," the man said, "the format was clear and the translation was fine. I made a mistake." The clerk said, "Well, I need to write down a reason for the return."

"In that case," said the man, "write down that there is a lot in that book which is tough to stomach." And he got his money back and walked out.

Here in Luke 6, we find a gospel story that might be difficult for us to stomach. It is a story of reversal, reversal of fortune. "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, and the despised," Jesus says. "And woe to you who are rich, who are full, and laughing." Woe to you, a warning to you.

Our immediate reaction is to selfishly figure out which category we fit into. If I think of us here this morning, I'd have a tough time saying we're poor, hungry, or despised, whom Jesus says are blessed.

Instead of falling into the category of blessed, we fall into the "woe" category. It's maybe the "you're in for trouble" category, or the "not-so-good-for-you" category. "Woe to you who are rich, who are full, and who is

laughing.” Compared to the rest of the world, we are rich, we are full, and society enjoys us.

After we figure out which category we fall into (it’s rather easy to determine), the next tendency we all have is to figure out how we can get into this blessed category. We don’t want there to be trouble ahead for us. We want to live as blessed people. But, once we think about all that we would have to do to become poor, and become hungry, and become despised, we don’t get very far in making it a reality.

The difficulty in preaching (and hearing) this text in a 21st-century American, mainline Christian context is that most of us who will hear this word are not inclined to trust it. When are the poor and hungry anything but a cause for sadness (except when they inspire an odd sort of gratitude, as in, “There but for the grace of God go I”)? We aim to be rich, full, laughing, and respected. Hearing the beatitudes from Jesus, we may be tempted to think, “I’ll take my chances with the status quo.” (Mary Hinkle Shore, *Working Preacher*, Feb. 16, 2025)

Fred Craddock, a renowned preacher and theologian, says Jesus isn’t really calling us to change our lot anyway. He said, “It is important to see these beatitudes as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Jesus does not appear to be saying, ‘if you do this, this will happen’ but rather stating a present reality. Here there is no contingency, no urging, no exhortation to act so as to receive a blessing or to avoid a woe.” Jesus is not urging us to change. He’s simply stating where God’s blessing resides. And those blessings reside not in the places we usually find them.

So often, when we read the Bible, our immediate reaction is to assess what a particular text means for us. What does it mean for me that God called Abraham to be his follower? What does it mean for me that a man named Job was subjected to great suffering and despair? What does it mean for me that God came to be one of us in Jesus Christ? What does it mean for me that Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor and woe to the rich?” What’s in it for us, we wonder.

When we just ask that question, “What’s in it for me?” we fail to consider that the first and foremost objective of the Bible (that book with all that’s so hard to stomach) is to tell us something about God. We should first be asking ourselves, “What does the call of Abraham say about God? What does the suffering and despair of Job say about God? What does the sending of God’s son to the world say about God? What does Jesus’ statements ‘Blessed are the poor and woe to the rich’ say about God?”

Today we learn from Jesus’ statement in Luke 6 something important about God. We learn that Jesus upends our standards for success. That God is on the side of the poor, the hungry, the despised, the hated, the excluded, the reviled, and the defamed makes us consider how the standards our world sets for what’s worthy and admirable and respected aren’t God’s standards.

It’s not a statement of how we, the rich, can earn God’s favor. Instead, we learn from Jesus today the immense capacity and desire of God to love everybody.

And, that the more we focus on those actions solely based on making us richer or fuller or accepted by others, we fail then to embrace a better way — putting our trust in

Christ above all those other things that dominate our daily lives.

There's had to have been a time in all of our lives when our lives were disrupted: a broken family, a major change in our finances, a huge shift in our lifestyle due to a job change, a move to a different city that caused so much disruption.

And when those events occurred, remember where your attention went. It went rightfully so toward correcting what had been upended. You were in a constant state of repair, of putting back together what had come undone due to your or somebody else's actions.

For a time, maybe for months or even years, your focus became taking care of yourself and those you were charged with taking care of. It's a very noble thing to do.

And yet in the process of doing all that, you may have discovered that you drifted a bit from the ways of Jesus. You preferred to stay with the status quo, which is what the culture says you must solely be focused on: job security, financial freedom, stable housing, a steady and rising income.

We learn from Jesus today in his sermon that there's another way of being. It's putting our trust not primarily in the things of the world but in God. Verse 7 of Jeremiah 17: Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.

We put our trust in ourselves, taking initiative to better our lives for ourselves and our families—sometimes to the detriment of what Jesus says is ultimately important: his love—for all—and his commitment to loving us regardless of our status.

Whether we become millionaires or have the nicest houses or have that intact family or achieve that respected title—all noble and happy things—isn't on the same plain with what Jesus was selling in this sermon.

His kingdom is built on something different—it doesn't take into account status or wealth or reputation. His kingdom is built upon the foundation that all are loved and all SHOULD be loved.

Rev. William G. Carter puts it this way: “Here's the gospel truth: If God has embraced you, the world can't take that away. What people say about you doesn't matter compared to what God says about you in Jesus Christ. The world's neglect or mistreatment does not have to determine how you will live and act. When you are beaten up or put down, remember that in Christ there is a love that surrounds you and will not let you be snatched away.”

The message here is not necessarily one of condemnation for the rich, filled up, and the well-thought-of. It's a show of solidarity for that segment of humanity by whom nobody else will stand.

So where does that leave us, we who seem to not be in the category of blessed that Jesus describes here? Should we sell everything we have and give it to the poor—in effect becoming poor ourselves? (There's a mandate from Jesus in the gospels to doing that.)

We're probably not going to do that. We've got mortgages to pay, savings to keep invested, retirement plans to meet. And within our culture, that's what we do and that's what we NEED to do.

Jesus tells us that God's purposes are different. God doesn't care what our bank accounts say. God loves with no regard to our ability or inability to stay current on our mortgage or climb the ladder of success or operate within the confines of what we think are traditional family systems that don't have any cracks or failures.

God loves extraordinarily all who God has created — the rich and the poor. And Jesus' turning upside down of what our culture says is most valuable speaks to how there's something beyond our world that he would have us aspire to.

Blessed are those who — ultimately, rich or poor — trust in the Lord, whose trust IS the Lord. That's in the Bible, and while that can be hard to stomach, it is truly where our hope lies.