

Title: Blessings and/or Woes
Text: Luke 6:17-26
Date: February 17, 2019

If you thought today's passage sounded strangely like the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew, you'd be right. It's similar, but different. Luke's version is a mere 32 verses, compared to the 107 verses in Matthew. They both have to do with blessings, though Luke contrasts these blessings with woes . . . though we are going to have to think carefully about what both of those words mean.

There is also a curious positional difference that is worth noting. In Matthew's version we read, **"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak . . ."** (Matt. 5:1-2) In Luke's version he had previously been up on a mountain to pray, but now **"He came down with them and stood on a level place."** (Luke 6:12, 17) That is why Luke's passage is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain.

Sometimes we say, "Well don't read too much into this," but I think this difference does indeed invite reflection. The place matters here. We read that Jesus comes down with his disciples and stands **"on a level place."** Jesus comes down and stands in the midst of those who have come to be healed, and those who are troubled. He comes to a level place to bring the reign of God to those who are gathered. Jesus comes to level with us about being in relationship with God, and with one another.

Before we try and make sense out of Jesus' teaching, we need to think a little bit more about context. Who was he speaking to? In his teaching, I am sure that Jesus was deft enough to appreciate the principle of "knowing his audience." In Matthew's passage we read: **"They brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics."** (Matt. 4: 24) In Luke we read that he came down to be with **"a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon [who] had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured."** (Luke 5:17-18)

Do you get the picture? Jesus was looking at this seething mass of humanity – the sick, the demoniacs, the epileptics, the paralytics – and he sat down and stressed to his disciples that *these* were the people that he came for. Even though the Kingdom of Man has dismissed them as an inconvenience and an eyesore, the Reign of God includes them! God's blessing is intended for them!

This orientation was also developed by Dallas Willard in the book entitled *"The Divine Conspiracy."* Rather than looking at the beatitudes as a finite list of helpful attitudes to be developed, Willard encourages us to remember the context in which Jesus was proclaiming his blessing. Jesus looked around at the kind of people who were following him. He saw people who were poor and dejected. He saw people who were mourning because they seemed to be far beyond the scope of God's shalom. He saw people who were meek and persecuted. He saw people who were on the margins – whom apparently society had forgotten – and said that the kingdom that He was ushering in was for the likes of these people! In the words of Nadia Bolz-Weber, **"[Jesus] was God's Beatitude—God's blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong."**

I think it is important to be conscious of this as we now start talking about "blessings" and "woes." Where to begin?

For starters, let's make sure we don't equate the "blessed" with those who are "saved," and consider those in the "woe" column as those who are "damned." That would be a dangerous error. Beyond that, I am always nervous when we start down a path of dualism.

You are probably aware that "blessed" has sometimes been translated as "happy." Playing on the word "beatitude," some of you may be aware that Robert Schuller taught a generation of people to think of this passage as "The Be-Happy Attitudes." Have you heard that? I am convinced we are not going deep enough if we are just thinking about the secrets to happiness.

The Greek word used here, *makarios*, has a semantic range that could include fortunate, and privileged. Happiness and blessedness may overlap but they are not identical. Indeed, as Jesus describes those who are "blessed," it's hard to see "happiness" written on any of these lives. Perhaps we are better off to think of those who are blessed as being satisfied, unburdened, or at peace.

When we read "**Blessed are you who are poor . . . Blessed are you who are hungry . . . Blessed are you who weep . . .**" this does not imply that these are conditions that are to be sought. Remember earlier we talked about "knowing your audience?" Jesus was simply looking at those around him – the poor, the paralytic, the hungry, the sick, those who were weeping, those who have been crushed by unfair economic systems – and assuring them that he has come for the likes of these. There is nothing that they have to do, and they are not exhorted to get their attitudes straightened out. They are not encouraged to become more docile and cheerful in their poverty. They are blessed because Jesus has come for the likes of them. They are the beneficiaries in this new upside-down order.

By contrast, when we read, "**Woe to you who are rich . . . Woe to you who are full now . . . Woe to you who are laughing now . . .**" we should read that as a word of lament, or a word of warning. Rather than a pronouncement of damnation, it is a word of caution that you just might be ensnared by something that you *think* is a gift, but is actually a false value. What you view as a source of security, many actually be an illusion. It is a reminder of how vulnerable we all are to a reversal of fortune.

We need to understand that a blessing is something that can't be pursued, but can only be received as a gift. To be blessed feels like you have someone's unconditional regard. It feels like you are not, and will not be alone; like you will be accompanied wherever you go. Being blessed feels like you have the capacity to rise above present circumstances, like you are more than the sum of your parts or past experiences. Being blessed feels like you have worth - not because of something you did or might do, but simply because of who you are.

To all this I would stress again that we be wary of dualistic thinking. Although the beatitudes appear to divide the world into two camps - the blessed and the woeful - in fact they do the opposite, reminding us that all conditions are only temporary—the now-woeful will be blessed, and the now-fortunate will eventually be woeful. In fact, we are one community of the human condition.

I don't think any of us are exclusively in the "blessed column", or exclusively in the "woe column." The more honest we are as we look within, we can see how we might find parts of ourselves in both columns even at the same time. When we are honest with ourselves we can admit ways in which we have put our trust in false or unstable measures of security. When we are honest with ourselves we can also admit ways in which we feel blessed by the unmerited love of the Christ we have experienced in our own life.

Since I know we have a number of schoolteachers in our congregation, let me say a word about grammar. You should be encouraged to know that the Beatitudes are in the indicative mood, rather than the imperative. The Beatitudes are not a direct call to action, to become poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, and so forth. Rather, the Beatitudes are a promise. The good news is that this is not a subtle call to more legalism and works righteousness.

I hope you can see this as the good news it is. In our persistent quest for happiness, this is not meant to be one more hoop to jump through – one more goal to achieve – one more attitude to be mastered. Jesus begins this teaching, not with promises of happiness, but with promises of blessedness even - and perhaps most - in the hard human experiences of mourning, meekness, peacemaking, persecution, and poverty. Jesus' form of "blessedness" only makes sense in light of the reign of God. Jesus' teaching here begins and ends with the reign of God.

Our next hymn is entitled "*Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit.*" I do want to point out that this phraseology comes from Matthew's version of the Beatitudes. Luke's version simply says, "**Blessed are you who are poor.**" Most scholars agree that Luke's version of these sayings is probably the more authentic rendering. So because of our tendency to spiritualize, let's not forget that the people who rejoiced at Jesus's coming were poor, the victims of a corrupt and abusive social system imposed by the Roman Empire and its native collaborators.

So together with our need to be honest in our call to look within for both blessings and woes; let us also walk in the way and spirit of Jesus by allowing our hearts to be moved as we respond to the poor and hungry as Jesus did.

Amen.

Luke 6: 17 – 26 *Jesus Teaches and Heals*

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.

Blessings and Woes

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.