

Blessings and Woes

Luke 6:17-26

February 13, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

I've heard that, if you are the primary cook in your household, you pretty much cook the same ten suppers over and over. Spaghetti, tacos, breakfast, hamburgers, pizza, sausage and roasted veggies, chicken enchiladas, pork tenderloin or chops, grilled chicken, meatloaf. There's our ten. Sure, there are variations, and occasionally I'll throw in something more exciting, but that's the basics. Is it that my imagination is lacking? Or that it's comfortable being in a rut? Who knows.

I've also heard that each preacher, no matter how long they have been preaching for, similarly has only about five sermons. Dress them up with different introductions, illustrations; pair them with different hymns; hope that no one remembers you said this same thing three weeks ago. It would be an interesting conversation someday, to see what you all think my five sermons are. I have some suspicions.

But I think I'm in good company. Here we are in chapter 6 of Luke, and this is the third time around for a similar sounding sermon. The first time we heard it, maybe we were distracted by Advent. Mary sings her song, when she and Elizabeth are celebrating their forthcoming blessed events. Mary sings "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Jesus touches on the same themes in his first sermon at the hometown synagogue, as we talked about a couple weeks ago: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed to me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Good news for the poor, the hungry, the lowly, the captives, the blind, the oppressed. Not so good news for the powerful and the rich.

And here is Luke's Jesus again this morning, saying much the same thing. Blessings for those who are poor, hungry, weeping, and being spoken poorly about. Woes for those who are rich, full, laughing, and being spoken well of. It's all along the same lines as Mary sung about before Jesus was even born, along the same lines as Jesus's first sermon. He's already repeating himself, which makes this preacher feel immensely better.

The Jesus we're getting to know in Luke's Gospel isn't given to long speeches; in fact, this is really the first time Luke tells us what Jesus's teachings are, at any length, anything more than a couple of sentences. That's one difference from Matthew's version of this passage. Matthew's Jesus has major chunks of teaching, related in detail.

Matthew's version of this passage is by far more familiar to us. The Beatitudes, in Matthew, only contain blessings and not woes. Matthew also tends to make them more spiritual and less material. So where Luke has "blessed are you who are poor," Matthew has "blessed are the poor in spirit." Luke says "blessed are you who are hungry," and Matthew says "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." As David and I were searching for hymns for today, we didn't find a single one that corresponds to Luke's version of the Beatitudes, and actually only a few at all.

I suspect that we—meaning American Christians—aren't too comfortable with Luke's version. We find ourselves checking off more boxes in the "woe" section than in the "blessed" section, so we prefer to stick with Matthew's Jesus.

I do want to point out a couple of things, though, that we probably miss on a first reading. First of all, what does "Blessed" mean, anyway. It's obviously not "Your life will be free of worry and trouble." It's not "Happy," as some versions translate it. I read this week that it's something closer to "you're respectable." I like that. The poor and hungry and weeping and talked bad about people in our world are

generally not respected. They're generally pushed aside, ignored, walked past. But Jesus is saying to them, "I see you. I hear your weeping. I know that the things being said about you are not true. I respect you. I love you." Jesus was treating them differently by lifting them up. Jesus is saying to the disciples and all of those listening, including us: if you want to look at the world the way I do—the way Jesus does—from a Kingdom of God perspective, then these are the people you look up to, these are the people you respect.

And if blessed means "respected," then what does "woe" mean? Well, for starters, it doesn't mean "cursed." If Jesus had wanted to say "cursed," then there's a word he could have used, and he instead chooses this one. It's an interjection, like wow, hey, heads up. It's supposed to get our attention. That same person I read earlier this week said "Woe is the opposite of 'do not be afraid.'" Jesus wants us to feel poked by these woes, wants us to listen up, wants us to fret about them. Mission accomplished, Jesus.

If you find yourself in one of those woes, Jesus is saying, you can change direction, shift things around, so that they don't apply to you anymore.

It may have caught your ear, at the opening of the reading, that Jesus comes down and stands with the disciples on a level place. It may have further caught your attention, because Matthew makes a point of saying that Jesus was on a mountain of sorts when he spoke similar words. This isn't an accident. Matthew is emphasizing the similarities between Jesus and Moses, and Moses went up the mountain to get the law. Luke has a different purpose in mind, and these blessings and woes go right along with that purpose.

If the people in the blessed list are the ones that are looked up to, respected, admired in God's kingdom. And if the people in the woes list need to change their ways and become more like the other list. If you're imagining the world as kind of a hierarchy, and those that are at the top need to come down, and those that are down below will be lifted up, well then, everyone ends up at a level place. And Jesus is teaching them all of this from a level place.

Jesus sees us, from right here next to us. Jesus sees the ways in which we are blessed—those ways in which the world doesn't respect us and ignores us and passes us by. Maybe it is that we are poor or hungry or weeping. Maybe it's something else entirely. Humans are really good at not respecting any number of people for any number of arbitrary reasons. Jesus sees us when we are disrespected by the world, and Jesus calls us blessed.

And Jesus sees us when we have too much and aren't sharing and are on the wrong track altogether. And Jesus calls us back, to put ourselves on a level place with everyone else. Jesus sees us then, too.

In some things, we are blessed and respected, in the kingdom of God. And in other ways, we have a ways to go, and Jesus has our attention.