

Blessings and Woes

Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Epiphany, February 17, 2019

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Text: [Luke 6:17 - 26](#)

In today's Gospel text, Jesus comes down from the mountain where he had been praying, and leads a crowd of people to a level place. The crowd of people following him come from all over. They are Jews from Judea and Jerusalem, as well as Gentiles from the coast of modern-day Lebanon. They are young and old, men and women. Judging from what follows next, we might also guess that they are rich and poor. Different as they are, in that place, in the presence of Jesus, they are on the same level: every single one of them has come to hear Jesus teach and to be healed of their diseases. As Jesus moves through the crowd, he is oozing power, healing everyone without exception. Jesus makes no demands on them. He meets them where they are and heals them without discrimination or favoritism.

Having met their physical needs, Jesus now begins to teach his disciples within earshot of the assembled crowd. He names four blessings and four woes which upset the traditions regarding God's blessing and presence. Wealth, privilege, well-being and social acceptance were signs of God's blessing and presence. Those who struggled to have even their basic needs of food or shelter met, who wailed out of grief, and who were shunned by society were surely rejected and abandoned by God. Or so it was thought.

I wish I could say that our modern culture has outgrown this way of thinking, but everywhere I go I hear people equating their riches with God's blessing. How many times have you been on social media and seen a photo of someone's new car or shiny watch posted with the hashtag "blessed"? How often have you heard someone preface good news with, "We have been really blessed"? Even in our own liturgy, we name several riches - our own bodies, our time, and our possessions - as signs of God's gracious love.

But what happens when your body breaks down? What happens when your time is stolen by a second or third job? What happens when you lose your possessions? Last summer, when I worked as a hospital chaplain, I met dozens of people who felt abandoned or even punished by God. They tortured themselves, trying to figure out what sins they had committed that led to their illnesses. They would make all kinds of promises - if I can be well again, I'll really clean up my act. I'll start a charity. I'll call my mother more often. I have had numerous conversations with friends who feel cursed, faced with one calamity after another. At one point in my own life, when over the span of a month our house sale fell through, the water heater broke, a pipe burst on the second floor, the basement flooded, and the car broke down, even I started to wonder: is my relationship with God was really all it's cracked up to be?! When our image of God is bound up with our riches, then the only God left for us when riches disappear is an absent or wrathful God.

Jesus comes on the scene to disrupt this image of God. Jesus says to his disciples, "It may look like the rich, well-fed, happy and accepted are blessed by God,

and the rest of us are left out in the cold, but the opposite is true! The ones who are poor, hungry, sad, and rejected are the ones who receive God's blessing and presence, but for the rich, this life is as good as it gets."

This is good news for the poorest of the poor, but for the wealthy, this is a hard word. It is tempting to duck and dodge Jesus here, to say, "Other people are wealthier than I am!" But Jesus is uncompromising - according to the Greek,¹ he is here for the poorest of the poor, the ones who have no food, no shelter, no clothing, and no means of making a living. Jesus fires his condemnation at anyone living above this level who abandon those most vulnerable and retreat into the comfort of their own wealth. Throughout Luke, we are reminded that the ones who enjoy wealth at the expense of the poor will have a camel-through-the-eye-of-the-needle time of it trying to enter the kingdom of God. Throughout Luke, Jesus also gives the wealthy opportunities to escape condemnation. Just think back to the rich ruler who won't give up his possessions and follow Jesus², or the rich man who did nothing for Lazarus as he lay at the man's gate, dying from hunger³. Jesus' is crystal clear on this point: the wealthy are condemned, unless they follow him in his ministry to the poor.

Jesus wants his disciples to know what following him will be like: Jesus has come to bring good news to the sick, the poor, the hungry, and the weeping. Jesus will bring healing to the outcast, without discrimination, and will proclaim God's favor and blessing upon those most hated in society. If the disciples are to follow his example, they will follow Jesus into the crowd, standing on the same level as the grieving, the hungry, the sick, and the poor. If they are to follow Jesus, they will likely be rejected themselves, just as Jesus was rejected. But any of Jesus' disciples who flatter the wealthy for the sake of a good reputation, or who fail to challenge them, will be no better than the false prophets.

Jesus radically challenges the conventional wisdom about God's blessing and presence. As he identifies God's blessing with the poor and hungry, he not only sets up his ministry to the marginalized, he also paints a new picture of who God is. He destroys the image of God as one who is aligned with power, influence, and privilege. Instead, he reveals a God whose solidarity is with the downtrodden and disinherited. God is not some distant and uncaring ruler who keeps humanity at arm's length. Instead, God chooses to be one with humanity through Jesus Christ, who will be among those who are cast out - not only in the sense of his ministry among them, but also in his identification with them. God is with us in Jesus, and Jesus is with us as one who suffers and is rejected.

In recasting the image of God as one who suffers with us, Jesus also destroys any notion that our worth or the meaning of our lives depend on our position in society. When good things happen for us, it does not mean we have earned God's special favor. When bad things happen to us, it does not mean God has abandoned us. Our worth and the meaning of our lives depend instead on the crucified and risen Christ. To the extent that we are poor, hungry, in mourning, or outcast, God through the crucified

¹ V.20, *ptōxói*, an adjective derived from the verb *ptōssō*, which means to crouch or bend over - it means literally those who are crouching, usually in a begging stance

² [Luke 18:18 - 27](#)

³ [Luke 16:19 - 31](#)

Jesus understands our suffering and extends God's presence and blessing. To the extent that we are rich, well-fed, happy, and accepted, Jesus challenges us to join him on the level plain, not disconnected or disinterested from the outcast, but rather one with them as a community that extends God's presence and blessing as the hands and feet of the risen Christ.

Jesus' sermon of blessings and woes was rattling around in my head on Friday evening, when I attended a hastily-organized demonstration to protest recent activity by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency. In the first week of February, ICE agents arrested more than 200 people in North Carolina, including more than two dozen employees of a gun manufacturing plant in Sanford. ICE did not, and is not required to, inform local agencies about their actions ahead of time. They can show up at a person's workplace and take them away, and nobody but ICE knows what happened to them. They simply disappear.

As I stood among the small but boisterous crowd at an intersection near Duke's East Campus, I thought about those people in Jesus' sermon who are recipients of God's blessing. The destitute, the hungry, the weeping, the rejected. I thought of all the children and spouses who wonder where their loved ones are, who will struggle now to make ends meet without them and will probably go hungry. I imagined Jesus standing there in that level place, on either side of an intersection in Brightleaf, saying, "Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, weeping, and deported; yours is the kingdom of God."

I also thought about the people in Jesus' sermon who are the target of God's woes. The rich, the satisfied, the contented, the accepted. I thought about the arrogance of a state that can disappear brown people like so much garbage, without due process or any care for those whose lives are destroyed in the aftermath. I thought about the indifference of people who, through privileges of citizenship, language or skin color, turn the other way and take comfort in their positions of power, however tenuous. I imagined Jesus standing among them, saying, "Woe to you who are rich, full, laughing, and privileged; this is as good as it gets for you."

As I looked around at my fellow protestors, I was reminded of the crowd that came to Jesus for teaching and healing. We, too, were young and old, people of different faiths, rich and poor. We were also US-born and immigrants. Talking with others and raising our voices together, I felt Jesus walking among us, oozing power. Even though some of the people gathered there

would not recognize Jesus, on Friday we were all a small part of a community that extends God's blessing and presence. On Friday, in that level place, I caught a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

We find the kingdom of God breaking through in level places, not elevated above and at a distance from others, or down below, craning our necks up at people with more wealth than we have. The kingdom of God comes through Jesus, God-with-us, who became one with the rejected through his suffering on the cross, and who walks through the crowds oozing power. Jesus leads us, his would-be disciples, into level places to call out the mighty and lift up the lowly⁴, not only in our words, but also through actions that meet people's needs right where they are. By the Holy Spirit, we are continually

⁴ See the *Magnificat*, [Luke 1:46-55](#)

formed into a community that extends God's presence and blessing to those who are the most vulnerable and rejected among us. As we approach the end of this Epiphany season, may the God who is revealed through Jesus also reveal to us those level places for our ministry, and make us bold to step into them. Amen.