

“Blessings and Woes”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 6: 17-26

In the gospel narrative, we have two variations of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The one we are most familiar with is the version from Matthew, and it includes the Beatitudes in a format that most of us recognize: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, blessed are the meek,” and so on. It’s definitely the version which eases us into hearing about God’s kingdom expectations.

Yeah, that’s not the case with Luke’s version. Luke just dives right in to who is blessed, and then adds these woes which counter every blessing. And on days when I’m feeling a little frustrated with how other people are behaving, or if life isn’t going exactly how I need it to go, man I can really get behind Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount. I mean, according to Luke, Jesus really socks it to them. You know, “them.” Everyone else who doesn’t agree with me, or believe what I believe, or is simply outside my “inner circle.” Instead of Matthew’s version, which is watered down with only “Blessed are those . . .” Luke adds those piercing “woes.” “Woe to you who are rich” – yeah, all of those who have more money and possessions than me. “Woe to you who are full now” – yeah, all of those who are fat and full from all their opulence. “Woe to you who are laughing now” – yeah, all of those who demean me or make fun of me. “Woe to you when all speak well of you” – yeah, all of those who get big-heads from the attention others give them. When I’m in that kind of mood, I can really get into Luke’s version of this sermon! Jesus just rails on everyone that is at fault, and makes me feel so good about all those opinions I have of everyone else. You know what I mean?

And then I read the blessings. “Blessed are you who are poor” – well, I don’t know if I would go that far as to consider myself poor. “Blessed are you who are hungry now” – yeah, I might be hungry at this moment, but I’m certainly not lacking for food or the money to purchase it. “Blessed are you who weep now” – I’m not particularly sad all the time, although I certainly cry more frequently than I once did – I think it’s a sign of aging. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you” – I mean, I’ve tried not to make many enemies, and don’t really look for people to hate me or revile me on behalf of anyone. For something that was making me feel so good at first, I’m not so sure this is working for me anymore.

Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount is a real contrast to the more familiar retelling in Matthew. To begin, consider what happens before this passage in the sixth chapter of Luke. Prior to this, Jesus and his followers get into a scrape with the Pharisees over what qualifies as work on the Sabbath, especially as they eat grain from the fields, and then heal a man with a withered right hand (6:1-11). In a real sense, it’s the first of Jesus’ confrontations with the religious establishment. Then, he and his disciples climb a mountain for prayer and reflection, and in the

midst of that Jesus formally chooses the twelve disciples who would be his emissaries to the world (6:12-16).

It is from that mountain that Jesus and his disciples “came down and stood on a level place,” with a great crowd surrounding them, people who had come from all corners of the region. Much like Matthew’s account, the people were there “to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.” One difference from Matthew is that in Luke, the people were seeking Jesus’ power and touch: “And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them” (6:19).

But when Jesus was ready to speak, his words are directed to one specific group: his disciples. “Then he looked up at his disciples and said . . .” (6:20). Peter Eaton writes: “These words are addressed to the disciples and not to the crowd, that is, to the church and not, in the first place at least, to the wider world . . . Luke is drawing a comparison of the life of the disciples with the life of Jesus. We are called to be the women and men that God has created us to be. Nothing less. In this pilgrimage, we shall follow Jesus, who is our unique example. The life of faith is so difficult precisely because there is no avoiding this individual responsibility. Luke’s beatitudes and woes state baldly something of what that commitment will mean for us” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 357-359).

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus comes down to the people, but is speaking to those whom he has just commissioned to be his representatives as to what his church is to be, who it is to embrace, how it is to view the world. And in these words, Jesus is speaking to us, reminding us what is expected of us – not as members of an organization, but as his disciples for a lifetime of service.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *I think it is fair to say that most of us hear [the beatitudes] from the well-fed end of the spectrum . . . What this means, I am afraid, is that many of us hear the beatitudes and take the high dive into a deep tank of guilt. Not many of us sell all that we own and give it to the poor, I have noticed, but at least we feel bad about what we have. Or else we learn to ignore this passage by putting it into the same file with all the other good Christian advice that no one we know personally has ever followed.*

The catch is, the beatitudes are not advice. There is nothing about them that remotely suggests Jesus was telling anyone what he thought they should do. When Jesus is giving advice, it is hard to miss. “Love your enemies, do good to those who abuse you.” Now that is advice – love, do, bless, pray – one imperative after the other, with no distinction between rich or poor, hungry or well-fed. It is the same list for all of them, whether they happen to be weeping or bent over with laughter.

The beatitudes are not like that. Jesus does not tell anyone to do anything. Instead, he describes different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. The Ferris wheel will go around, so that those who are swaying at the top, with the wind in their hair and all the world’s lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down there right now, where all they can see are candy wrappers in the sawdust, will have their chance to touch the stars. It is not advice

at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone on that wheel.

I think it is the blessing and woe language that trips us up on this passage. Whenever we hear words such as “blessing” and “woe,” we think “reward” and “punishment.” The blessing things must be what he wants us to do and the woe things must be what he does not want us to do, only where does that leave you, exactly? Finding some reason to sit down and sob in hopes you can move from one list to the other? Doing your best to ruin your own reputation so no one will speak well of you? Blessings and woes cannot be manipulated like that. God cannot be manipulated like that. The beatitudes do not tell us what to do. They tell us who we are, and more importantly, they tell us who Jesus is.

When he first said them out loud, everyone heard them in a different way, depending on who they were. Jesus never said who was who. He let them all sort themselves out, but after they had done that, there was no mistaking what Jesus was good for and what he was not.

Anyone who was there that day to win the lottery could go on home. Even if they managed to nab a little bit of his power, it would not help them to get on top and stay on top. Jesus was not any good for that. In fact, people who were attached to that were in for some woes, because the way things are is not the way they will always be, and no one gets to stay at the top of the wheel forever. What goes round, comes round. That is not advice. It is not even judgment. It is God’s own truth. It is also pure blessedness for those on the bottom, who never really expected to get off the ground . . .

Neither the going up nor the coming down is under our control, as far as I can tell, but wherever we happen to be, the promise is the same. Blessed are you who loose your grip on the way things are, for God shall lead you in the way things shall be (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, Cowley Publications, Boston, ©1999: 54-56).

This ride called life which we are all on can take us up to the greatest of highs. And it can take us down to the lowest of lows. But what gives me comfort and hope is knowing that no matter where we are on that ride, we are always and forever in the loving care of the one who started the ride in the first place. One of our challenges as human beings is to recognize that through those highs and lows, those blessings and woes, we are continually called by our Lord to act, to serve, to be with God’s children for the upbuilding of God’s kingdom. That’s why Jesus spoke these words to his disciples. That’s why he speaks these words to us today.

One commentator states: *God is turning the world upside down, and taking discipleship far beyond a simple “follow me” to a level of sacrifice that is nothing less than daunting . . . God asks for – indeed demands – our all. Everything. Material goods and money are but a part of what God expects us to give up and give over. God wants the entirety of our lives. The destitute poor have nowhere to turn but to God. God watches over them and blesses them abundantly in God’s way, not the way of the world: they will be filled, and they will laugh, and they will inherit the kingdom of God. To be disciples is to follow in this way. To be blessed of God is to have nothing but God.*

Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain – those wondrous yet stark beatitudes – jar us out of our faithful complacency. The God Jesus speaks of is not always the God we

proclaim. Our human inclination is to fit God into our own small definitions, cultures, and places. But God is always breaking down the barriers we construct to keep God in or out. Here, once again, God is calling us back. God is always reminding us that we must empty ourselves, turn away from the ways of the world, and then – and only then only by God’s grace – receive the fullness of blessings God offers to the utterly destitute, the marginalized, the expendable (David Ostendorf, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 358-360*).

How do we empty ourselves and serve Christ with the entirety of our lives? How do we stop seeking to limit God, and instead let God loose to move and expand through our lives of service?

For years, we have supported Family Promise, what was once known at Interfaith Hospitality Network, here in Indianapolis. This ministry provides housing in churches for one week at a time for families that are homeless, as they seek permanent housing. In our community, this is a partnership with the churches in Speedway, as our congregation provides lunches for the week for those families who are hosted four times a year. But host churches like Speedway Methodist and St. Gabriel’s Catholic Parish have a lot of strain on their volunteers each time they host, because it takes volunteers to drive the families to and from the downtown center, feed them dinner, and stay each night at the church for the families’ safety and security.

What might it look like if John Knox stepped forward and offered to serve with not just our money or our gifts of food, but also with a day of service for one of these weeks at Family Promise? During the last week of March, Speedway Methodist Church will host families at their church. Would you be willing to join me for one of those days, and cook and serve dinner, or help drive the van, or spend the night at the church? Could this be one way we as a congregation of disciples continue to grow into giving our whole selves for the betterment of God’s kingdom? Let me know if you’re interested, and look for more information in the days to come. We do so much – and yet, we could also do so much more. Is this one such new way where we can answer God’s call, let go of our comfort, and give God our all?

Jesus’ words meet us where we are at whatever time in life we find ourselves. Sometimes that requires us to hear the woes so we can be with the poor and hungry. Sometimes that requires us to hear the blessings so we can be lifted up from our lowly state. Whenever we hear these words of our Lord, may we hear them as his disciples, and be willing to give everything for the upbuilding of his kingdom.

Thanks be to God for God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Amen.