

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 17:5-10
SECOND LESSON: Luke 6:17-26
February 13, 2022

“Blessed”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Someone sneezes. What is our reflexive response? We say, “bless you!” or “God bless you!” And if you live with Vicki and sneeze as many times as I do in a row you’ll hear, “Bless you . . . and your kids . . . and your friends . . . and your enemies etc. etc. etc. There are a few possibilities as to the origins of this, but chances are it dates back thousands of years. One theory is that in ancient times people believed that demons could enter the body during a sneeze, and the blessing kept them out. Another is that it was a response to the black plague in the year 590, sneezing being an early sign of the plague. I suspect both have validity. But all sneezing aside, what does being blessed mean?

Most of us are familiar with the Sermon on the Mount. It’s the one that gets all the press. What we read today is the Sermon on the Plain. Some look for a theological meaning behind the fact that this was a level place as opposed to a mountainside, but it may have just been simple geography. We are told that this teaching took place just outside of Capernaum. But Luke’s version also differs from Matthew’s in other significant ways.

Matthew has eight blessings and no woes. Luke has four blessings and four woes.

Matthew writes in the third person saying “they shall be filled.” Luke writes in the second person saying, “you will be filled.”

Matthew says “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke says, “Blessed are you who are poor.”

Matthew says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Luke says, “Blessed are you who hunger now.”

Both offer blessing to those persecuted because of following Jesus. But then Luke adds four woes. We have to wonder who was in attendance at these different locations. Was Jesus targeting specific people when he included “woes?”

- “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.
- Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.
- Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.
- Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

The tone of Luke’s account is also challenging because it appears as if Jesus was merely describing what is, rather than what could possibly be. If you’re rich now, that’s it. You have received your comfort. If you’re well fed now, that’s it. You will go hungry in the future. Laughing now? Be prepared to

cry. Respected now? You're on the side of false prophets. It is not clear that changing behavior will change the judgment. We have to guess that that may be the case based on the fact that Jesus often said provocative and shocking things to get people to wake up and change their ways. But the text itself doesn't offer any guarantees. Jesus makes sweeping statements with no subtlety or explanation. It is possible to interpret simplistically in a two-dimensional way. Poor people good. Rich people bad. But we know from Jesus' other teachings that this is not really accurate. Jesus spoke with many rich people who were good and honorable people, and not everyone he came up against who was poor was a paragon of virtue.

What we need to do in situations like this is compare scripture to scripture, remembering that Jesus also said things like, "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matthew 5: 29-30) **Jesus didn't mean this literally.** He was making a point. But the point Jesus was making is still uncomfortable for those of us who live in the affluent west, even if it isn't as black and white as it first appears.

Each one of the blessings Jesus promises has a corresponding woe. This is a carefully composed list. The poor receive the kingdom of God, because the poor are under no illusions that they are in need. They live fully dependent on God. But the rich in this case have received their reward, because they have only taken care of themselves. They have eaten a rich diet and ignored the need around them. The rich are condemned for getting rich at the expense of the poor. The well fed are condemned because their abundance is the cause of the starvation of others. Those condemned for laughing are the people who carry on partying stepping over the dying to get to their next event. They laugh at the expense of those who weep.

God has always favored the poor. God is always on the side of the oppressed and disadvantaged. Those who are powerless and marginalized are close to God's heart. And if we are not among those facing famine and starvation in this world, God wants us to do something about it and intervene in the lives of those who are. God wants us to love those God loves in very practical ways. Poverty is not an ideal. There is nothing lovely about poverty. Squalor, hunger and cold are not beautiful. A child dying on the streets is not beautiful. Being forced to beg is not beautiful. God doesn't love poverty. God loves those who are afflicted by it.

Jesus extended God's blessing to the poor and powerless. But this doesn't mean that they suddenly got rich. From the standpoint of the prosperity gospel, however, "blessings" are always material in nature. By their measure Jesus was definitely NOT blessed. Brought up in poverty under the stigma of illegitimacy, no formal education, unmarried, no children, a three-year itinerant ministry ending in a brutal public execution. This guy was clearly doing something wrong.

To be blessed can mean many things. When we appreciate all of the material things we have in life we say that we are blessed. Gratitude is appropriate. It is right for us to be grateful for the material goods we have, for family and friends, for love given and received. But it doesn't mean that God loves us more than someone who is poor. We say we are blessed when we're happy, but not all who are happy are blessed. People can be happy because they have succeeded in an evil scheme. Not all happiness is the same. We say we are blessed when we are financially secure, but not all who have financial security are blessed. Some have money because of greed and corruption. We say we are blessed with children, but God's blessing is also on those without children. We call all these things blessings and at one level they are, but to be BLESSED in the way Jesus was speaking about goes much deeper than that. **To be blessed is to be close to the heart of God.** Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man." I would not call an experience like that a blessing! But Jesus said, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets."

To be blessed is to be on God's side. It is to walk with God. And while we need to be wary of judging on the basis of emotion, sometimes this blessing can take the form of an inner state of peace that makes what is happening to us on the outside almost irrelevant. Mary the mother of Jesus was blessed. She did not have an easy life. The apostles were blessed. Most died as martyrs. We can be blessed in the most horrendous of circumstances when we experience God's presence with us.

I can't tell you how many times have people said to me, "Have a blessed day," or "God bless you." But I sometimes wonder, do the people who say these words really appreciate what they are saying? Are they pronouncing material blessing or spiritual blessing, or are they just saying words with no meaning? The blessing Jesus spoke of transcends this world and brings us into the next. It is the blessing of God's presence in all circumstances. There is an ancient Irish blessing that comes close to this. Originally in Gaelic it is so ancient no one knows who wrote it, but it comes from a people familiar with poverty and struggle.

*May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields
and until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand. Amen.*

Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵ This is what the Lord says:

“Cursed is the one who trusts in man,
who draws strength from mere flesh
and whose heart turns away from the Lord.
⁶ That person will be like a bush in the wastelands;
they will not see prosperity when it comes.
They will dwell in the parched places of the desert,
in a salt land where no one lives.
⁷ “But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
whose confidence is in him.
⁸ They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.
It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.
It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.”
⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?
¹⁰ “I the Lord search the heart
and examine the mind,
to reward each person according to their conduct,
according to what their deeds deserve.”

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, ¹⁹ and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.
²⁰ Looking at his disciples, he said:
“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
²² Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.
²³ “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.
For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.
²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.
²⁵ Woe to you who are well fed now,

for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.
²⁶ Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.