

"Blessed"
Luke 6:17-26
11 February 2007
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[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

Luke 6:17-26

He 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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice 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. "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. "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. "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Prayer.

It was a chaos of people;
a nightmare of parents with small children,
adult children and senior parents.
Pushing and shoving,
the short standing on the balls of their feet
to gain a glimpse,
or seek a strategy,
to wiggle and wedge
closer to the focus of the frenzy.
Gentiles from the north
mixed with Judians from the south
sprinkled undoubtedly
with mixed race Samaritans
and orthodox Galileans,
each speaking a dialect

or language different
from the other.

Some had politics on their mind.
They had come to hear him preach;
for they had heard of his ability to command
crowds,
to offer a good news of liberation
that resounded with a population
enslaved by foreign occupiers.
"A new leader!" they sought;
"a full blooded Jew like us!" they hoped;
"perhaps even a king!"

Others had more pragmatic reasons to seek
him:
they were sick or diseased

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and they heard that
Jesus had a growing medical practice
that produced truly miraculous results.
With a desperation that approached
that of a cross-boarder
Mexican cancer clinic
promising cures to one and all,
the crowd of diseased and sick
pressed close to Jesus,
for they had heard
that if they only touch his garment
they will be healed.
Like the hemorrhaging woman,
the blind,
the leper,
the deaf,
these people were tired;
tired of getting the run around,
spending all their time
and all their money
on health care,
not getting any better,
in fact, getting much worse.
These people were tired
of being treated
as unclean, segregated,
contaminated, quarantined,
isolated,
by family, neighbors, and faith.

Luke identifies a third group
of individuals in the crowd
on the expansive plane known as Migeddo,
at the foot of Mt. Tabor:
these were the ones who sought exorcism,
to be exercised of their unclean spirits.
This invokes images
of voodoo or black magic,
closed, tortuous psychiatric wards
of the 1950s,
straight jackets and electrical shock therapy.

Indeed we shun that which we don't understand.
In an ancient world that did not understand
seizure or psychosis,
anxiety or depression,
developmental disabilities or Down syndrome,
these individuals were especially vulnerable
to the powerful
the wealthy members of society.
They were shunned, at best,
euthanized, at worst.
It made for a combination
that resulted in desperation.

In the center of this mix
was Jesus
and his few
newly chosen disciples.

Those who had politics on their mind
got a good sermon
from a master orator,
but it certainly wasn't
what they expected.
Jesus,
as he is prone to do,
turns the world upside down
for the smug
and the satisfied.
Jesus,
looks around
and recognizes the
profound need
of poverty
and hunger,
unemployment,
illness, disease and death.
The old-school saw
of organized religion
taught that
if you were wealthy,

it must be by God's blessing.
Likewise if you were
healthy
and well fed,
it was because God was smiling upon you.
The opposite, therefore,
must be true:
those who are poor,
the hungry,
the unemployed,
the sick and diseased -
these people are reaping
God's judgment
for some unseen sin.

HOGWASH! Jesus proclaims.
Blessed are you who are poor;
woe to you who are rich.

It is a blessing to be poor;
because it means that you
have given away
all that God has given you;
you have been a good and thrifty
steward of all God's gifts;
you have taken part in the
just redistribution of wealth,
so that no one need
ever be in need again.

But woe to you who are rich;
because it means that you
have been miserly with God's gifts;
you've buried them for the master's return,
you've stored them up in bigger barns,
you've invested them for a rainy day.
Woe to you who are rich
because you have failed to recognize
that God provides for your every need,
that you don't need to rely upon

treasure that rusts, declines, and is eaten by
moths.

Woe to you who are rich
because you have with-held
food from the mouths of hungry children,
cast people out into the cold,
taken their job
(probably outsourced them to virtual slave la-
bor)
and robbed them of their last ounce of dignity.
Jesus had just told the rich young man
that the wealthy have as much chance of
getting into the kingdom of heaven
as it is possible to push
a camel through the eye of a needle.
Not very good odds.

The hungry must be getting their due reward,
God's judgment
for some previously committed sin,
or so it was thought.

HOGWASH! Jesus proclaims.
God does not toy with us
dangling a carrot on a stick
in front of our nose.
There is no divine game
of revenge or retribution,
lightening strikes
or raining pitchforks.
Please, that would be so ... Job-like,
so Old Testament.
There is a new sheriff in town,
one that doesn't hold sin for ransom,
one that is pulling back the curtain
of a new age
and revealing the completeness of
God,
... and it is rooted in grace.

Blessed are you who are hungry now;

woe to you who are full now.
Since the beginning of time
we've been blaming the
the hungry, poor, and homeless
for their pitiful circumstances
as if they had a voice
at the table of economic industry.
We blame them for being lazy,
not toiling their fair share
with the rest of us.
We use terms like welfare,
which is neither well or fair.
The hungry are those
who can not sow, tend, or reap;
children, the aged, and those
with such infirmities
that place them at the table of dependence.
These are the people Jesus blesses,
not the aristocrat or the landowner,
who is already privileged to be given the land,
the talent, and the resources
to produce abundantly.

To be perfectly honest,
Jesus is inditing every one of us this morning,
because we all have full stomachs.
Even if we have donated food to the disadvan-
taged,
even if we have worked the food service line
spooning food onto a plate,
until we take our place in the line
with the least, the last, the forgotten
we will not know the blessing of hunger.
Unless we remove every barrier between
the haves and the have-nots
of this world.

Those visited by death
must have done something to
deserve their sorrow,
or so it was thought.

“What did I ever do to deserve this?”
you may have even asked
at one time or another
in your life.
The opposite is often thought
to also be true:
you're happy,
so you must be living in God's blessings.
Happy people must be blessed people.

HOGWASH! Jesus proclaims,
as his listeners are tossed for a
third tumble,
spin drying the world once again:
Blessed are you who weep;
and woe to you who laugh.
Those who are in the valley of the shadow of
death
are nearer to God than any other time in life.
This is precisely when
one should pay most attention
to watch and listen for
the movement of God.
It is precisely at these moments,
life and death defining moments,
when God is most likely to act,
and through his actions,
to be revealed.

Not one of us should seek out mourning.
Life serves it up to us on a platter
all by itself.
With the fragility of the human,
biological organism,
with the divide between life
and death so fine,
none of us should take life for granted.
Everyone of us should expect
a lifetime of suffering,
cycling from one to another,
including, at some point,

ourselves.
Just as it is completely natural
to live and die,
so too, is it completely natural
to form relationships with others
- friendships, marriage, and family -
such that
those we love
inevitably will suffer, too.
When we suffer together,
when relationships
endure painful experiences together,
they are blessed with strength.
We get through hard times together.
We bear one another's burden,
we help carry the load,
and we find
in the final analysis
that our relationships are stronger
and that we are blessed.
Likewise in our relationship with God.
Our relationship with God
is strengthened when we get through
hard times together.
When we see his hand moving,
and we know that he is compassionately there,
when we have passed through the far
side of suffering,
then we experience the blessing
of our God and Savior.
It deepens our lot.
It draws us closer.
And in the end,
it is pure blessings.

Finally,
those that rise to the top
must be blessed.
The doctors, the lawyers,
the Ph.D.s and C.E.O.s of this world
must be blessed.

How else can you explain
McMansions and BMWs?

HOGWASH! Jesus exclaims.
Blessed are the hated, excluded, reviled, and
defamed,
on account of the Son of Man;
woe to you when people speak well of you.
This final blessing
comes as result of living life
with the name of Jesus
on you lips and sealed in your heart.
Being his disciple,
learning all he has to teach,
and being his apostle,
fulfilling his will,
will lead to a lifetime of being hated
for Jesus' sake.
Those whose intent is sin or evil
will slam you, hate you,
revile and defame you,
simply because you are
Christ's own.
You might be laughed out of boardrooms
or bedrooms,
but know this to be true,
living a life of Christ
means that you've taken a side
in the cosmic struggle between good and evil.
Those who are not on Christ's side
are looking to knock you down and knock you
off.
You are blessed
simply by taking a stand
for Jesus.

So what is the harm
of people speaking well of you?
You might ask.
"Pride must have a fall,"
Shakespeare correctly observed.

Even the author of Proverbs chides in:

“Pride goeth before destruction,
and an haughty spirit before a fall.”

(Proverbs 16:18)

Indeed, pride

is a persuasive suitor;

it works at the soul,

chipping away a little at a time,

making its steady

deceitful progress.

It should not be confused with confidence,

which, like Gemini's twin,

is the good reflection

of pride's evil shadow.

People with a multitude of expectation

come to Jesus this day,

much like all of us

assembled this morning;

each of us seeking

insight,

deeper meaning,

some sense of

how we fit into God's larger plan.

Jesus throws out the old-school plan

of law and righteousness,

and ushers in a new era,

where poverty is God's priority,

where the homeless and hungry

are lifted up,

where the life of discipleship

is redefined

and the road to redemption

first takes us to forgiveness.

Blessings to you

who choose to walk this road.

Amen.

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