

Blessing the Level

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, February 17, 2019

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

Sermon

In all the shuffle of our lives, I imagine that most of us can compile a great list of the things we need on any particular day.

I wonder how many of us would have “a blessing” on our list of needs. I wonder if those people who gathered “on the level place” with Jesus this day would have. The reading today tells us they came for many things: healings, cures, teaching... And yet, a blessing is what he gives them... and some woe.

Blessings seem like they might be besides the point, quite honestly. To look at what they are perceived to be, there is of course a hashtag for this: #blessed can easily show you that blessings have something to do with:

A really good vacation.

Good food.

An awful lot of very well produced wedding photos.

A happy family.

Definitely, always, looking our best.

Jesus’s list of blessings does not appear.

One of the great gifts of our scriptures is that we do not have just one account of who Jesus was, and what he did, and what he meant. Here in Luke, we hear blessings and woes in a sermon on the plain. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear only blessings, as part of a sermon on a mount.

That’s not an accident, that difference. They have two very different meanings. In Matthew, Jesus lists what we call beatitudes from the mountaintop so you remember that he is just like Moses, bringing commandments from on high. Here, in Luke, he gathers people on a level place and looks *up* at them and shares blessings... and woes, highlighting that God’s work will come to level the high and low.

His words echo the song his mother sang when she was pregnant earlier in Luke. It was Mary who sang at the news of her child who was to come:

*‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,*

for you have looked with favour on the lowliness of your servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

... she goes on...

You have brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

You have filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Can we be surprised when Jesus says,

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

One thing we can say about Jesus, he is his mother's son.

Jesus takes this gathering of people, people who have come seeking healing, and cures, and wisdom... people who have come...looking up to find a messiah, because so much has been keeping them low, and he sets them on a level place and flips the world upside down and reminds them that those parts of life that have laid them so low actually lift them up in the coming reign of God. That they do not need him for blessing... he uses the present tense: they are blessed.

One of the most dangerous ways to read Jesus is as a person who means what he says.

There is no way for me to escape the sting of these words, as a solidly upper middle-class person in these United States. They carry a woe of their own for me... and force me to interrogate my life, my finances, my choices. I wonder if I live too much into St. Augustine's jab at his youthful challenges of faith, "O God, make me pure, but not yet."

By any measurement of this global economy, I am pretty sure that most everyone in this room constitutes a miracle of economic possibility and potential, even while I am also sure that there are many in this room who have lost sleep in the last month because of money in one way or another. We live in the pinnacle of civilization by many estimations, and yet we have one in five children in this state who aren't sure of a next meal.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for us, then, perhaps the invitation to this level place with Jesus, is to not forget those who are hungry, poor, rejected... and to hold so loosely onto whatever wealth, food, or position we have that it cannot help but slip free from our fingers to share with them. There is a way for me to view my wallet as a bucket: a container for me to store up money as it flows around me... like drawing water into a bucket from a stream. But there is also a way to view it as a rudder, shaping the flow of resources that are never solely mine flow past and around me... and in so doing, I can begin to steer my life.

Because we have far too many drifting, #blessed places in our culture where we say:

“Wealth means you are blessed.”

“Food means you are blessed.”

“Having happiness (or avoiding sorrow) means you are blessed.”

“Being ‘accepted’ means you are blessed.”

Yet Jesus is all too clear about what will constitute a blessing in the reign of God... blessing will be with those who have not held so tightly to security, to wealth, to privilege and power that it has separated them from the plight and pain of others... blessing will come in the level place, where we all see each other face to face and find God in the face of friend, or neighbor, or stranger. Woe will come to all those who cling to that which might make them feel safe, but instead just walls them off from holiness of life.

This week, our nation’s president declared a national emergency at our southern border, in order to activate a military response there which can build a barrier between us and the number of people who are currently seeking a new life here in our midst.

I do not disagree that we have a national emergency on our hands: we have far too many people within our borders who live in poverty and pain, who live in fear or anxiety for their health or their lives. Yet Jesus’s blessings do not specify nationality or country of origin, and we do not have to look too deeply into our history of foreign policy in central and South America to view our border and be reminded of what Dr. King meant when he said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere... whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” ^[1] It is deeply concerning to view this week’s actions through Jesus’s words, and they ask us to consider whether we are storing up woe, or freely offering blessing.

Yet there are wondrous signs of blessing around us as well. Today, Toto and her family are here with us in church, newly reunited from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In this church: across oceans and continents. It has been amazing to watch you go, Foreside, for the past few months as you have lived into the faith that God’s gifts are God’s, and our calling is to participate in the work of directing them where God’s spirit is at work. I am thankful for Toto, for Jan, for so many people who have met at the level place of life, and found a way to recognize the blessing of Toto’s family, and the opportunity to share in God’s dream for them by reuniting them in safety here as they claim asylum.

I wonder where else we will be called to give ourselves away, to come down off the hill, and lift up those who have been laid low by the #blessed culture, and told they were not a blessing when Jesus has been looking up at them for eternity saying over and over and over... “Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you.”

There is a puritan prayer of our ancestors in faith that says:

Let me learn by paradox

That the way down is the way up,

That to be low is to be high,

That the broken heart is the healed heart. ^[2]

Thanks be to God for this community in which we get to give ourselves away in order to receive the fullness of the gift of who we are. Amen.

1. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* ↩
2. From *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* ↩