

## Luke 6:17-26

Epiphany 6C + February 17, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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Blessings and Woes

The Word of the Lord from Luke 6:21b: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh."  
This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Our gospel reading is full of blessings and woes, and they're easy to get wrong. Is it really that great of a blessing to be poor, hungry, weeping and hated? Is it really such a bad thing to be prosperous, fed, laughing and liked? Jesus has this way of taking what's obvious and flipping it on its head.

A little context will go a long way: this is the start of what is called Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain." Jesus faces a crowd of disciples – not just the Twelve whom He has just set apart, but all sorts of people who have been following Him. Along with these disciples, there's also a huge multitude of spectators, Jews and Gentiles. They've gathered because they've heard about Jesus. They've heard that He works miracles, heals diseases and casts out demons – and so He does. He heals them all – right then, right there! Then He begins to speak, and He specifically targets those who follow Him; and the first three beatitudes – or blessings – go like this:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.  
"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.  
"Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh."

Blessed are you who are poor, hungry and weeping, Jesus tells His followers. Why? Not because they are poor, hungry and weeping, but because they are following Him. They are blessed because they believe in the One who teaches salvation, heals diseases and casts out unclean spirits. Even if they're going to be poor for the rest of their lives in this world where riches fall apart anyway, in Christ they have the kingdom of God. Even if they have to scramble for food in this life, in Christ they are invited to the Marriage Feast of the Lamb which has no end. Even if they weep now because of the troubles and suffering of this life, they will laugh and rejoice with angels – and with the Lord Himself – for eternity.

They are blessed because they follow Jesus, they hear His Word and they believe it. What they lack in life is a good reminder that this is a world full of lack and loss, dying and death, so they ought not fall in love with this world and leave Jesus behind; because whatever they lack in life, they have the Christ and His salvation, a gift so precious that it is worth losing all else to keep.

That's why the final beatitude sums up for the first three: "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets."

If, uh, *hypothetically*, the world were to turn against Jesus, it would turn against His followers as well, because that's just what evil does. But even if the whole world – the whole dying world that can't get rid of disease and unclean spirits – were to hate and exclude and revile and spurn Jesus' followers for following Jesus, they would still be blessed because they follow the One who does heal diseases, cast out unclean spirits and raise people from the dead.

That might seem far-fetched to Jesus' listeners that day – why would anyone hate the One who delivers them from all evil? But then Jesus mentions the prophets, and that probably rings a bell. Time

and time again, the Old Testament prophets prepared the way for Jesus, calling the people to repentance and declaring that the Christ would come. Time and time again, the people refused to repent; and refusing to repent, they spurned, ostracized and even killed the prophets sent by God.

With a history like that, it's no surprise that Jesus also speaks woes in the text, and the first three go like this:

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

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

"Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep."

Do His hearers face wrath and woe if they are rich, full and laughing? Not necessarily. You have to read these woes with the blessings before them. If people are blessed because they follow Jesus, then people are cursed if they don't follow Him. That's the key to these woes: if you pursue riches instead of Christ, woe to you. If you'd rather have a full belly than Jesus, woe to you. If you'd rather reward your emotions than be His disciple, then woe to you: for if you are not in Christ, then His kingdom is not yours. Instead, there is only weeping, loss and mourning for eternity.

But must this be an either/or? Can one be prosperous and follow Jesus? Can you eat your fill and still be forgiven? Can you laugh and be a Christian? Some would say that, as a congregation, you are way too happy to be Lutheran: must you be dour to follow Jesus?

It is not always an either/or. Consider the matter of wealth: while news stories usually highlight the lifestyles and scandals of the top 1% in this world, there is no one in this room who isn't in the top 10% of the wealthy in the world; and I daresay that the only time that you and I go hungry is when we go on a diet because we're usually satisfied at meals ... too satisfied. Be aware that wealth is relative and the devil is tricky: so while you enjoy prosperity greater than nearly everyone in human history, you're still tempted to believe that you don't have much; and so you're tempted to envy and greed, tempted either to make the things you have – or the things you want – to be more important than Jesus. When you do that, you have a false god. When you do that, woe to you.

It is good to repent of such sins now. The time will come when your days are drawing to an end, when you realize that more time can't be bought with all the wealth in the world, when food no longer satisfies and when laughter is hard to find as death steals closer. At such a time, a tender, repentant and faithful heart is a great blessing, for it says, "Even though I am only growing poorer, hungrier and sadder, I know that Christ will raise me from the dead."

Thus the first three woes warn of not following Jesus, and this is summed up by the final woe: "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." This mirrors the final blessing: if people speak well of you like their fathers did to the *false* prophets, it means that they speak well of you for rejecting Jesus. If that's the case, then you've made an idol out of popularity, and popularity will not raise you from the dead.

So if we want to summarize these blessings and woes, Jesus is saying, "Blessed are you for following Me. Woe to you if you are not." Even if the world makes you miserable for being a Christian, blessed are you because the kingdom of heaven is yours.

There is a good chance that the world will make you miserable. We are enjoying somewhat of a respite now, but there are plenty of forces that want to see Christianity excluded from society. In many corporations, it is difficult to be a Christian and not be pressured to bow the knee and support all sorts of immorality. It is quite likely only a matter of time until churches have to pay property taxes, which will endanger the viability of many. It may be a short time before you and I are poor, hungry and weeping specifically because we are Christians. This also happens at a much more intimate level: in many families,

there will be believers and unbelievers; and inevitably, you will have to offend a loved one to follow Jesus, or offend Jesus to keep the family peace.

Following Jesus can make you miserable in this world. But if that is the case, then blessed are you. If you are a follower of Jesus, you follow Him, right? And if you follow Jesus, you should not be surprised if your life is one of suffering for the faith, because His was. Long before these blessings and woes reached your ears, Jesus was poor for your salvation. Not only did He have no earthly goods to His name, but He became poor with your sins, infirmities and iniquities. He was crucified impoverished of righteousness; there, the kingdom of heaven wasn't His as He suffered His Father's wrath, so that the kingdom of heaven might be yours.

Long before these blessings and woes reached your ears, Jesus was hungry. Lent is not far off, where soon we will hear of His temptation in the wilderness, where He fasted forty days as He dealt with the devil for you. He was hungry so that you might be satisfied, fed at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb.

Long before these blessings and woes reached your ears, Jesus wept. He wept over sin and death, He mourned the curse of sin in the Garden of Gethsemane; and then He went to the cross and defeated sin and death so that you might laugh in heaven.

Long before you heard Him warn that you might be rejected for being His, He was rejected. He was hated, excluded, reviled, scorned, spurned, mocked, scourged and crucified. Why? He endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him – and that joy is your salvation.

So where you are tempted to the glitter of this world and consider not following Jesus, then know the woes and repent, for this world is passing away. And though you might suffer poverty, hunger and grief in this world – perhaps specifically because you are a Christian, still rejoice and be glad: though this world is passing away, the eternal kingdom of heaven is yours. Though you weep now, you will laugh with the host of heaven. Why? Because you belong to Christ.

Blessed are you, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen