

## Blessings & Woes

### Luke 6:17-26

Jesus 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.

## **Blessings & Woes**

Luke 6:17-26

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### **I.**

This morning I would like to do a few things which are *seemingly* unrelated. The first is to pull back the curtain a bit on the process or method I use to write a sermon. The second is to address the address which is today's scripture reading. Third, which is *totally* out of character for me, is to seek to find a comfort in the gray area, rather than the black and white. Fourth, and finally, I'd like to speak to a crazy notion which has been banging around in my brain for a few years now. This idea is still very much unformed. However, that this idea is beginning to coalesce, just the tiniest bit, is undeniable.

First, the sermon writing process. While you might be tempted to think that I have some kind of grand plan for the sermon each week, the truth is I only ever begin with the smallest of ideas and, then, do the hard work to simply allow them to take me where it, apparently, must go.

### **II.**

Today's scripture from Luke 6:17-26 is referred to as "The Sermon On The Plain," owing to verse 17 which reads, "*Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place.*" The subject matter, though, is quite similar to what we find in the 5th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, which has the more familiar moniker, "The Sermon On The Mount." While Luke's version is somewhat abridged and delivered from a different altitudinal pulpit it is, essentially, the same sermon or, at the least, a recitation of the same basic subject matter.

There are, however, a some notable distinctions. Whereas Matthew's version of the sermon begins with eight blessings, Luke's sermon begins with four blessings and four curses. While the blessings spoken of in Matthew are *spiritual* in nature ("poor in spirit," "hunger / thirst for righteousness"), the blessings in Luke are much more *tangible* ("poor," "hungry now," "weep now"). Where Matthew's version expects disciples to be *perfect* like God, Luke's version expects disciples to be *merciful* like God (which we read, later, in verse 38).

### III.

Another distinction of note between these two sermons is the audience Jesus is addressing. “The Sermon On The Mount” in Matthew seems to be directed to *all* in attendance; both the disciples, and those in crowd who had gathered to be healed and to hear Jesus teach. However, “The Sermon on the Plain” in Luke seems to address the disciples *in specific*; the crowd just happens to be there.

This notion is reinforced contextually, as the verses which immediately precede “The Sermon On The Plain” tell of Jesus’ selection of the Twelve Apostles:

*Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”*

Today’s sermon text picks up right after this.

### IV.

While the content of both “The Sermon On The Mount” and “The Sermon On The Plain” is intended as an exposition on how to live a life of compassion and mercy, emphasizing the need to love one's enemies, treat the poor with generosity, and not judge others, “The Sermon On The Plain” *expressly* intends this instruction to be a guide for the *leaders* of the early church. Which, I would submit, makes it particularly relevant for us here in *this* church, where *everyone* is charged with leading in whatever way, large or small, the Spirit calls them. Meaning, we *all* must listen closely; and, yes, this means *you* too.

Though the sermon on the Plain, or Mount, is often seen as an affirmation to *some* and an indictment against *others*, today I would like to suggest to us that life is rarely “either/or.” Instead, it is more often “both/and.” Which is to say, a mixture of both blessings *and* woes.

## V.

There are times in our lives when we won't have enough, while other times our cup will overflow. Times when we will hunger and feel empty, and other times we'll be sated and feel complete. Times when we will weep and mourn, and times we will rejoice and laugh. Times when we will be reviled, and times when others will speak well of us. Days when no matter where we walk we are reminded of woes, and other days we will beam with blessings. Though this may not necessarily be as it *should* be, or as we *want* it to be, it most certainly *is* the way it *is*.

However, few of us are ever really okay with this. It becomes the task of discipleship, then, to *learn* to be okay with this. Outrage is easy and despair is to be expected, but acceptance is the harder course, with peace its reward. We must *learn* to live with uncertainty and injustice, with bad luck and heartache, regardless of any notion of some future, hoped-for silver lining or deeper meaning. The question we should be asking is not "Why?" but "How?"

## VI.

know I speak for many of the more mature folks listening to, and reading this sermon when I say life used to be a whole lot simpler. Not necessarily easier, but simpler to be sure. Not only was there less to do, there were far fewer steps involved in doing whatever we had to. While this sense of a world gone mad is something with which every generation has had to contend down through the ages, the dizzyingly pace of technology has both profoundly accelerated and vastly broadened such a natural developmental and evolutionary process.

There seems to be no area of human life where one is not left feeling overwhelmed, left behind, and reduced to shaking one's head. Though this has led to a vast widening of the world in that we discover there is so much more to learn, see, do, and consider than we once could have imagined, ironically it feels as if we are experiencing less and less of the world for ourselves simply because we realize there is so much we will never, *ever* get to; let alone understand.

## VII.

Simply put, there is too much content with which to contend. For example, Linda and I grew up in the same television market around Buffalo, New York. A few weeks ago we were waxing nostalgic for the days when there were only *three* television stations: 2, 4 and 7 (in the Very High Frequency band) which were received using a simple set of “rabbit ears” protruding from one’s television. If you were really fortunate, you had a rooftop antenna, which was cutting edge technology for the times. We also remember what a big deal it was when a fourth station, Channel 29, came on the air (in the Ultra High Frequency band). This increased our view possibilities by 33%.

It was an astounding leap which then proceeded to push us down a slippery slope. Soon came cable, then satellite, then the internet, then the switch from analog to digital, then Youtube, then smart phones, then 3G, 4G and 5G. Suddenly, the viewing possibilities increased *thousands* of times over; all within *my* own life time.

## VIII.

Of course, this same process is at work in just about every area of human enterprise: science, politics, culture, education, art, literature, ethics, morality and, yes, religion. It should come as no surprise, then, that a great many of us (those of a certain age for sure, but younger folks as well) are coming to the realization that so much has become much *too* much. For myself, I do not mind the work involved in navigating all of this, but when one gets the sense that we are going nowhere fast it would seem prudent to sit oneself down and reassess the situation. (And, I would submit, a snowy Sunday morning when in-person worship has been cancelled is an opportune occasion to do so.)

While some may still be in denial about this, the simple truth is our world has always been on a trajectory into the gray, particularly so in the past few decades. This this not necessarily a bad thing as the world was never quite as black and white as we had assumed, or as we had been led to believe. So, we were due for some truth-telling. Or, more precisely, for some *truths* telling.

## **IX.**

Of late, however, it feels as we've reached some sort of critical mass of gray. That is to say, there is so much gray area it has become as a vast ocean in which we are being made to swim. While this was manageable for a time when we were simply a bit off-shore, the ocean has continued to fill such that the shoreline of black or white has receded so far that we have lost our points of reference and have become disoriented. The gray now stretches from one horizon to the other. So much so, that sometimes it is difficult to even remember the general direction in which we had be swimming.

Having recognized and admitted this, the first step (and it is a doozy) is to not panic and, then, to remember that as people of faith we are strong swimmers who are well-equipped and uniquely suited for the gray. At such a moment calm is called for. We must learn to relax and get comfortable in the gray because it is here and it is not going away.

## **X.**

Second, we must decide on our endeavor: will we simply tread water so as to just keep our heads above the surface, or will we be bold enough to start swimming? While it may sound like an easy choice it requires far more energy to swim against tide and current than it does to tread water and allow oneself to be swept along. Frankly, some people just can't muster that kind of energy, and few of us are able to do so all the time. So, we must accept at the onset that whatever our endeavor some degree of floating will be involved. This is to be expected.

Third, and this is the part that gets tricky and hangs up a lot of people, in which direction should we be swimming? Long gone are the signal fires and lighthouses to mark the way. Now we must allow subtly be our guide. Even in a vast sea of gray there are still shades to be discerned, if only tacitly. Each of us has an innate sense of direction. We must trust our instincts and go with our gut.

## **XI.**

Fourth, we must place our hope in the belief that ours is not the only motion that matters. While it is true that we are responsible for our own

movement, it is equally true that the gray area in which we swim is moving as well. Or, more precisely, it is *being* moved and we along with it.

Though it is increasingly difficult to discern some kind of grand plan for this world, all that is required from us is to begin with the smallest of ideas and, then, do the hard work to simply allow them to take us in the direction we, apparently, must go. That even in a sea of gray, there still exists blessings and woes, virtues and vices, rights and wrongs. That the ramifications of what we do and decide to believe are not limited only to the spiritual realm, but make a tangible difference both to us, and to those who, like us, are awash in gray. And, while it would be nice to strive for perfection, mercy is our only mandate. Certainly for others, but for ourselves as well.

## **XII.**

Finally, the crazy idea. I think for a great many churches these days, treading water so as to barely keep their collective head above the surface would be an acceptable outcome, not to mention a welcome relief. Fortunately or unfortunately, this *particular* church has long since gone past that point. We are moving in a direction, undeniably so. This is certainly a great delight, and something to be celebrated.

However, while it is true that the first priority is for us to keep moving in that direction, I'm starting to get curious about where all this is going? We have spent a great deal of time, energy, and resources the past few decades focusing on children and young families; and it shows. I also think we do a very good job supporting people in their changes and in times of challenge; it is our bread and butter. Where I see a need and opportunity for growth is in caring for folks at the end of life.

## **XIII.**

Though it is too broad of a topic to cover in one sitting, and too late in the sermon to begin to do so this morning, I would like to leave you today with the smallest of ideas: would it be possible for us to modify the manse in order it might be used, if needed, as a place of respite and reprieve from the woes of life, and to offer the blessings of a dignified death?

I recognize this is a *very* tall order and *way* out of the box. For far too long the church, in general, has considered this last phase of life as seemingly

unrelated to its work and mission. Perhaps. However, as society increasingly fails to care for its aging population, couldn't we, as a church, pick up the slack by exerting leadership that seeks a better way to care for those who are aging within our *own* congregation? Let us tread some water on this and see if, at some point, a direction might be revealed. Amen.