

## **Blessing....or Woe**

A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
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**Text: Luke 6:17-31**

When it comes to real estate, they tell us there are three important considerations: location, location, location. In biblical interpretation, there are similarly three important considerations: context, context, context. Today's scripture text is going to sound familiar.....sort of. You'll hear words that sound a whole lot like "the Beatitudes," those beloved words of blessing from the collection of Jesus' teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* Remember?

Those Beatitudes are found in the gospel of Matthew, and our reading is from the gospel of Luke. They too are presented as a sermon Jesus delivered to the gathered throngs, but not from the hillside. Here in Luke, Jesus and his disciples come from the mountain and stood on a flat expanse of land. And then there's the little problem with the conclusion. Following the "blessed are's" there are corresponding "woes"—as in "woe to you"—something we don't find at all in the more familiar Matthew text. What's going on?

It helps to understand the difference in context between the two gospels. Matthew's gospel emerged from a primarily Hebrew community, emphasizing Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy of "messiah" the One sent by God to save creation. The placement of Jesus "on the mountain" puts him above the people in the teaching posture of a rabbi. (hmmmm, not so different from the lofty places Presbyterian architecture places the preacher!) The community which produced Luke's gospel was more diverse, religiously and culturally. Luke paints Gentiles in a favorable light, for example. His gospel is universal, and Jesus is seen as the Redeemer of the whole world. Luke also emphasizes Jesus' compassionate treatment of society's most vulnerable folk: the poor, religious outsiders, women, and children.

Listen for contextual clues that may help us hear God's word of hope and warning, in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter at the 17<sup>th</sup> verse. [Luke 6:17-26]

Many of my clergy colleagues use the lectionary to determine the text for their preaching, so a certain amount of clergy chat goes into discussion of these texts and how we're planning to approach them for preaching. Recently I was in a gathering where all the ministers were commiserating about the difficulty of this text, when one of my colleagues turned to me and said pityingly, "I can only imagine what you're going to say about the woes *at Fairmount!*" Of course his unspoken implication was that this text was going to stick it to us. Few things get my back up like self-righteousness, and I also figured this clergy brother was overdue for a little instruction. I turned calmly to him, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "Apparently there are some learnings in this passage we *all* need to get!"

I confess I might have been a little more gracious. But fact is, the good news of this text isn't immediately apparent to anyone, whether rich or poor! A simple reading might cause us to conclude that Jesus is predicting a fundamental reversal of the social order, such that the poor, the hungry, the grieved, and the hated will be blessed, and the rich, self-satisfied, and popular will be brought down. But ironically, that interpretation has been used historically to *preserve* the status quo, to keep the oppressed down with the promise of "pie in the sky by and by." Don't worry about your poverty, your hunger, your slavery; and certainly don't do anything to try and change it: eventually you will get your reward in heaven.

It's true: Luke de-spiritualizes the Beatitudes of Matthew, and makes Jesus' teaching about material conditions in human life. Rather than addressing "the poor in spirit," here Jesus is speaking of literal poverty, which is entirely consistent with the point he makes over again that God favors the poor, the lowly, and outcast, and judges the haughty, the complacent rich, and self-righteous. But my problem with the traditional interpretation is that it doesn't really change the heart of reality; it just puts different players in the driver's seat. Such a reversal caused poet Robert Frost to advocate "a semi-revolution."

*The trouble with a total revolution  
Is that it brings the same class up on top.  
Executives of skillful execution  
Will therefore plan to go halfway and stop.  
Yes, revolutions are the only salves,  
But they're one thing that should be done by halves.*  
[Complete Poems of Robert Frost, ed. by  
Lesley Frost Ballantine. Holt, Rhinehart,  
Winston, 1964]

Things are not as they should be. And Luke's version of the Beatitudes describes the gap between the haves and have-nots in a way that is eerily contemporary. Changes are coming. But somehow I can't see God produce blessing through another's downfall. Or designing a kingdom predicated upon anyone's being hungry, hurt, and persecuted.

Something more profound is going on here, and to get it we have to return to the context once more. The text offers the telling little detail that Jesus "came down" from the mountain where he had been praying, and "stood with a great multitude" from the surrounding regions. He doesn't use the third person ("blessed are those who mourn"), which is more encompassing, but also less personal, but the far more intimate second person – and from his vantage point on the level with them, I see him looking right in their eyes, to say "Blessed are you....woe to you...." Jesus here is not pictured as the orator delivering the Word literally from on high, but as the healer, right smack dab in the middle of the masses, reaching out to them, touching them with the very power of God. Luke wants us to see the One who has brought God's love down from heaven to the place where it makes a difference: on earth, with the people, to heal and save them *now*.

And this love is equally available to rich and poor, sorrowful and joyful, outcast and in-crowd. The "blessed" and "woe" construction suggests that the material condition of our lives affects our sense of need, and desire for what Jesus has to offer us. I believe Jesus looked into the eyes of the wealthy who gathered that day on the plain with compassion and deep concern. He knew they were not immune to the heartaches and contingencies of human life. But he also knew the human tendency to make wealth and privilege a matter of ultimate concern. And giving any material condition transcendent importance will surely lead to a woeful existence. Gold is a poor substitute for God. We cannot live without bread. But we cannot live on bread alone.

So we might paraphrase this text with a cautionary observation: "Things are not always what they seem." To the poor, it says: Have courage! Don't give in to despair. God is working to change things, even now. The *Plain Dealer* used a mocking tone to describe the efforts of Cleveland Heights/University Heights citizens to take their case for the upcoming public school levy vote into churches, and to employ the power of prayer on its behalf. But people of faith know that God intends for all children to have opportunity for a quality education. Why wouldn't we pray and campaign and volunteer to help bring it about? We are blessed with confidence that justice will prevail, despite the odds. To the rich, this text says: Watch out! Don't put your trust in possessions or privilege which will ultimately prove to be untrustworthy.

And to all who would be his disciples, it says: Follow my example. Meet hurting people on level ground and touch them, feed them, and heal them as you have seen me doing.

Friends, the blessing of God has very little to do with the external circumstances of our lives. Our riches and status are not signs of God's favor. Our poverty and grief are not burdens to be borne in favor of reward later on. The biblical understanding of blessing might be contrasted with the contemporary cultural understanding: one is God-centered, the other, self-centered. To be blessed in biblical terms is to entrust one's life to God, to live by the values of God's kingdom, to serve the poor, to work for justice, and to seek the peace that unites all God's people.

I know someone who shows me what that looks like. Charlotte Dowlen works as a secretary here at Fairmount. And every morning when I come to work, I say Hey Charlotte, how are you? And every morning Charlotte answers the same way, I'm blessed. Now Charlotte has not had the easiest life. Her husband died young of heart disease. She has worked hard to provide for herself and her aged mother who lives with Charlotte. The apartment building where she lives has been broken into a number of times. Charlotte doesn't drive, so she leaves home early in order to catch two buses to get to work. She herself has a number of health problems. But every day: How are you, Charlotte? I'm blessed.

And you know what? Charlotte *is* blessed. Her faith in God's goodness and presence is unshakeable. She draws strength from the Rock of Ages. Her life is framed in gratitude for God's grace which is better than anything else. And you know what else? Charlotte is a blessing. You have been blessed if you happen to have telephoned the church when Charlotte is the receptionist, or been greeted in person if you've walked in the Main Office. I know she is a blessing in her church where she is an active member, and she blesses her colleagues here with cheerful good humor and a spirit of teamwork.

Hey, Fairmount, how are you? May God grant us grace to see that we are blessed, and to want nothing more than to be a blessing.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE IN GOD'S GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

