

Sermon for Epiphany VI Year C 2019
Blessed Are You, Woe Is Me?

Nothing has power to change us, confront us with reality, open our ears to a new truth, or turn our life in a different direction like a reversal of fortune can—

A time when our world is turned upside down or the day we realize we are going backward not forward. It seems that is exactly what Jesus is doing in today's gospel. (Actually, come to think of it, that's what Jesus is always up to.)

The gospel of Christ reverses business as usual: preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to prisoners, offering sight to the blind, and setting the oppressed free.

Look at Jesus' life and you will see one reversal after another. The Christian life and faith are based on reversals. Reversals are at the heart of the four beatitudes and the four woes we just heard read from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain as presented in the gospel of Luke.

As Luke tells the story, Jesus has just spent the night alone on a mountainside, praying before he chooses the twelve disciples who eventually will become Apostles.

As morning dawns, he and the newly called Twelve descend from the mountain to find a vast crowd waiting for them.

The multitudes have come from everywhere, seeking help, seeking Jesus.

And Jesus with power literally pouring off his garments heals them all.

Then, standing "on a level place" with the crowd, he tells his would-be disciples what discipleship actually looks like.

In a nutshell he says:

Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable.

Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and popular.

Yep, that's the fabulous good news of the Kingdom of God.
A world turned upside down.
Those who are poor, hungry, or weeping;
those who are hated, excluded, and slandered—
they all can expect things to get better.
Their situation will be reversed and they will be blessed.
They will be given the opposite of what they have now.
Likewise, those who are rich, those who are full,
those who laugh, those who are popular and respected
can expect to lose what they now have.
Their situation will also be reversed.

What are we to make of all this?
This system of blessings sounds ludicrous.
Is it simply a redistribution of wealth and resources?
Is Jesus making poor people rich and rich people poor?
So, what happens then?
Do the newly rich become poor and the newly poor rich?
Does Jesus love malnourished people more
than those who have enough to eat?
Does he prefer our lives burdened and broken by loss and sorrow?
Is there no place for joy or laughter? A good meal?
None of that makes sense;
and, actually, in the gospel of Luke as I have often pointed out . . .
Jesus is either on his way to a meal, at a meal,
or leaving a meal throughout the entire gospel.
So obviously Jesus must be exaggerating,
speaking figuratively. Right?
He can't be speaking about literal hunger as in starving for bread,
or the dressed-in-rags, slum living poor?
Or deeply sad people who are drowning in grief and despair,
nor those unlikeable, unpopular, unimportant people
no one can blame me for avoiding.
So, if that's not what Jesus is saying, then what is he saying?
What do we hear in his words?

There must be some way we can wriggle out of the woe's column and get into the blessed column, right?

If we answer "right" then we would be quite wrong.

There is no way around Jesus' Sermon on the Plain—

God's favor does not rest on

the well-fed, the well-off, and the well-liked.

It rests on those who have absolutely nothing to fall back on but God.

No credit line, no next egg, no fan base, no immunity.

Nothing.

If you want to know where God's heart is,

this sermon as reported by Luke insists

we need to look to the world's most reviled, wretched, starving, grieving, shamed, and desperate people.

They are the fortunate ones.

They are the blessed ones

on whom God's promise of more and better rests.

Now what do we do?

What are we to do with these words spoken to us, his disciples?

Wallow in guilt?

Romanticize poverty?

Avoid happiness?

No, that doesn't right.

The very fact that Jesus prefaces this hard teaching by alleviating suffering in every way possible

suggests that he does not glorify misery for its own sake.

Pain in and of itself is neither holy nor redemptive in the Christian story.

Jesus' life and ministry is all about

healing, abundance, liberation, and joy.

Also his Sermon on the Plain is not prescriptive.

Nowhere in his litany of blessings and woes

does Jesus tell his listeners how to behave.

The sermon is not advice. It is not even judgment.

It is simply the truth about the way things work,
pronounced by someone who loves *everyone*.
That is someone who wants what is best for everyone in every possible
way—in body, in mind, and in spirit.

So again, I have to ask, what do I or anyone who is cozy and
comfortable, in good health, reasonably happy,
living a First World, middle-class life, do with this gospel lesson?
How can we reflect on it?
How can we receive it, sit with it?
How can we hear his words on blessings and woes?
Is it a matter of “blessed am I and woe is you” or
“blessed are you and woe is me”?

Perhaps it’s not a matter of either/or *but* both/and
as in “blessed am I *and* woe is me.”
We cannot hear Jesus’ words as only materialistic,
because this world and our lives *are more than*
just the things we can touch, own, use, or eat.
But neither can we soften his words to the point that they no longer
challenge and empower us to see what life in this world is truly like
and live differently.

What if Jesus is not really distinguishing
between spiritual and material lack
or spiritual and material abundance?
What if it is both?
It seems to me it has to be a “both/and” message.
How could it not be?
After all, Jesus was human just like you and me.
He had human needs just as we do.
Some were physical, some emotional, and some spiritual.
Just like you and me.

Within each one of us there are parts of our life
that are rich, full, and abundant
and within each of us there are other parts
that are empty, broken, and grieving.

It's not one or the other . . .

but both at the same time.

(And what is true of us as individuals, is true of us as the church,
and as a community, even a nation.)

That's why the blessings and woes of today's gospel
should not and cannot be seen as a final judgment
or a system of reward and punishment.

They're just not.

They are not even at odds with one another.

They are most emphatically God's way of saying yes or no
to where and how we find meaning in our lives.

Every blessing and every woe,

every yes and every no,

is Jesus' response to finding the true meaning and purpose for our life
in authentic discipleship that, frankly,

my life circumstances and the world will not teach me.

These blessings and woes show us we will not grasp the joy and freedom
of the Christian life we seek until God becomes our everything,

our all, our go-to, our starting place and our ending place.

The parts of our life that are rich, full and abundant need to sit in the
"woes" column because our willingness to do so might just save our life.

In a profound reflection on Jesus' upside-down kingdom,
theologian Frederick Buechner writes:

The world says, 'Mind your own business,'

and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.'

The world says, 'Follow the wisest course and be a success,'

and Jesus says, 'Follow me and be crucified.'

The world says, 'Law and order,'

and Jesus says, 'Love.'

*The world says, 'Get,'
and Jesus says, 'Give.'
In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot,
and anybody who thinks [they] can follow him without being a little
crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.*

This is not what is known as the “prosperity gospel.”
This is not “blessing” as health, wealth, and happiness.
This is a teaching so costly, so soul-shaking, so unpalatable,
that most of us will do anything to tame it or ignore it.
What these blessings and woes are “yes-s” and “no-s”
grounded in God’s love for us and wanting our well-being
in body, mind and spirit.
We need both the blessings and woes, the “yes-s” and “no-s”
because our hearts, as Jeremiah put, are “devious” even “perverse.”
Our hearts deceive us from knowing the difference
between what is good and what is bad or evil.
Paraphrasing Martin Luther, we are often so deceived that we are as
likely to call something good, bad and call the bad, good.

So, when we’re too comfortable, too satisfied, or too secure,
whether spiritually, emotionally, or materially,
Jesus says, “No, that’s not the way,”—
not because we are rich, full, or happy
but because we can too easily become self-satisfied and self-reliant.
The problem is that our life then becomes small and self-contained.
There is no openness and receptivity to a new way of living,
a new way of relating to those around us.
We have no need to see beyond ourselves,
to love the person next door,
or to work for change that makes a difference in the lives of others.
Woe to us when we are convinced that
we have no needs beyond the things of this world.
Woe to us when we are convinced that
we have no need to grow and change.

Woe to us when we are convinced that
we have no need of God.

Jesus promises blessings when we are empty, weak, or grieving,
--spiritually, emotionally, or materially,
not because there is any inherent value or goodness in poverty or misery
but because our heart is softened,
our eyes are open,
and we desire something more.
In those times, we know there has to be something more than
the values and objects of this world
to rule our lives, provide meaning, and establish our identity.
In those times when we are no longer captives to our delusions
that we have no need of God . . . in those moments,
Jesus says, “Blessed are you . . .”

There is a gift in the reversals of both the blessings and the woes,
in both yes and no.
Jesus’ disciples embody in this world the reversals of God.
You and I embody these reversals when
we strive to love our enemies,
do good to those who hate us,
bless those who curse us,
and pray for those who abuse us.
We embody the life of the blessed when we trust and live in the tension
of the reversals God brings to our lives.
For it is those reversals that we discover life in the midst of death,
the light that no darkness can overcome,
and a love that will not let us go or let us go it alone.

Let us pray that God will help us know
the blessing of those who have nothing but God.
May God keep us from wriggling away and help us to somehow sit with
the woes and learn the meaning of being blessed and blessing.

