

“Being Blessed”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 86:1-7

New Testament Lesson: Luke 6:17-26

Were you one of those kids who always got picked first? Or did you get picked last when teams were chosen for a game of baseball, soccer or dodge-ball? It was always good, wasn't it, if your best friend was “captain” that day. Then, no matter how good or bad you played, at least you knew you'd get picked early.

The disaster was when your worst sport and your worst enemy came up on the same day. Gradually, all the kids around you would gather on one side or the other as you stood there, more and more alone, an obvious reject.

Rejection is exactly what Jesus is talking about in today's New Testament lesson. When he says, “Blessed are you who are poor, ... hungry, ... weeping, ... hated, ... excluded, ... reviled, ... and defamed,” he's talking about those who have been rejected by society.

Being poor in 1st Century Palestine excluded you from opportunities to be an accepted and active member of society, an unfortunate circumstance that continues today, to some extent. Those who are poor were – and are – left to go hungry, weeping, hated, excluded, reviled and defamed.

What's more, people used to believe the poor and the sick fell outside of God's blessing. Elsewhere in the Bible – in John, chapter 9 – Jesus encounters a man born blind and his disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.”

Now, it's a mistake here to think that God caused the man to be born blind, or the poor to be poor, the hungry to be hungry, and so on. Nowhere in the New Testament does God cause pain and suffering.

On the contrary. The New Testament reveals God's response to the pain and suffering of this fallen world, brought on after we chose in the Garden of Eden to defy God's word and turn from God's blessing.

God responds to our defiance by showering us with the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ – and the blessings that brings – even while we suffer in a cruel and unjust world.

We see this in today's scripture passage, where Jesus says the poor will inherit the kingdom of God – the riches of God's blessing and abundance – the hungry will be filled, those who weep will laugh, and that those who are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed for following Christ will rejoice and leap for joy, knowing the promise and the faithfulness of God.

So, the question is what blessings of the Lord are you experiencing? And if you're not, why not? We have people in this church who are poor, hungry, and grieving. Some are even hated, excluded, reviled and defamed in their faithful following of Christ.

Does that mean they are not blessed because of their lot in life – because they haven't achieved a sustainable income and can't put food on their table; because they or their loved ones are weeping amid illness, disease and even death; because some are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed for no godly reason?

No. Jesus never said we would be free of poverty, hunger, illness, grief and hatred. In fact, he knew we would face such struggles. He knows that we do, that you experience hunger – spiritual if not physical – that you've dealt with disease and death, that you and other good people have been unjustly hated and reviled.

The blessing doesn't come from escaping human suffering. The blessing of God comes from drawing together amid our suffering – as the church, as families, as communities and nations, and developing the spiritual vision-spiritual wisdom and maturity-to see and appreciate the hidden blessings God sends us in our most dire circumstances.

Today during our visiting theologian Sunday school class at Westminster Hall, Dr. Stancil spoke against what he calls the counterfeit Gospel of Prosperity. Some preachers say that God blesses the faithful with material wealth and wellbeing, and by extension, that those of meager existence and constant suffering fall outside of God's blessing. It's just not true!

In fact, Jesus clearly says, "... 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."

If your wealth, abundance, joy, and reputation is gained at the expense of those who are poor, hungry, weeping and hated – maybe even causing it, because of a greedy desire to hoard what would help the poor and the downtrodden – then, yes, woe to you indeed.

People may get away with it in the short run – they may boast of their riches and power and prestige now, within the corrupt and heartless corners of society – but those whose riches, power and prestige come at the expense of others, they cannot stand in judgment before the Lord! And often, we see that, don't we?

We see people rise to riches and power only to be brought down by their greedy and abusive actions. Thank God that the power and glory of divine truth and justice is greater than anything on earth.

In fact, God's divine judgment and justice can be worked out even beyond the grave, as it is in the following little story.¹

A woman with a terminal illness hired an artist to paint a picture of her that she could give to her husband before she died. At the first sitting, the woman asked if he could paint a gorgeous diamond and sapphire necklace around her neck. He said of course, and asked her to bring the necklace next time so he could see what he was painting.

"Oh, I can't do that," she said. "I don't own such a necklace." "Then why do you want it in the picture?" he asked. "My husband has his eye on a neighbor lady down the street. After I die and they get together, I want her to spend the rest of her life looking for that necklace."

God's divine judgment and justice worked out even beyond the grave, most assuredly. And the faithful who are suffering from poverty, hunger, tragedy and injustice, they will most surely in the fullness of time receive their heavenly reward.

But what about now!?! What does Jesus have to say about the suffering and injustice happening today, tomorrow?

Well, that's exactly what our New Testament lesson is all about. When Jesus talks about the blessing reserved for those who suffer greed and injustice and in the same breath he talks about those who wield power and hoard wealth that could otherwise be used to help people, Jesus is talking about today!

He's saying that we have it in our power as a people to end poverty and hunger, to comfort those who mourn and weep, to embrace and protect those who are – for no godly reason – hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. To the extent that you as an individual work to end poverty, suffering and hatred, you are blessed.

To the extent that we as a church do that, we are blessed. To the extent that we as a community and as a nation lift up the downtrodden and bring down the abusers and hoarders of wealth and power, we are blessed. To the extent that we don't?

Well, as Jesus said, "Woe... to you and to me, and to all the world." I began our sermon time today talking about the injustice of the playground – being picked last just because you're not the best athlete or most popular student. Fair or not, it's hurtful, and that's not right, that's not kind, that's not just – in the eyes of God.

But, as I said, God can take our injustices – big and small – and turn them toward his righteousness, if we remember to turn toward God. Learning what it feels like to be an outcast on the playground or anywhere else in life is a painful lesson that stays with us all

¹ Bishop Robert Fannin, North Alabama Conference, United Methodist Church.

our lives. Having felt the sting of rejection as a helpless child shapes the way we relate to people as adults. But what shapes it even more is how we relate to God.

Do we turn to God in our times of poverty and hunger – spiritual or material – our times of suffering and grief, our times of isolation, loneliness, and persecution? If so, we are blessed – blessed by those whom God has put in our lives to shine the light of Christ, guide us in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, and shower us with the abundance of God's love and grace and mercy.

And in our times of defiance – when it is we who are hoarding wealth and abusing power – do we turn to God in humility and repentance? If so, we are blessed – even amid our misguided ways – blessed to have the power and wealth to make a difference in this world, blessed to be an instrument of God's divine justice and undeniable truth, if we but turn to God.

No matter where you find yourself in the days and weeks ahead – among those suffering or those in need of repentance – take this opportunity right now to decide how you will respond, how God can best bless you, and through you, how God can bless the lives of others. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of love, we are grateful for the love you have shown us in Christ and through other persons, for patience with our failings, for kindness in our weak moments, for praise when we have done our best, for forgiveness without counting the times, for those who go with us when the going gets rough, for those who trust us again after we have abused their trust.

For all gifts of love, we thank you, and especially that your love for us is stronger than anything in all the world, even stronger than death itself.

We pray this day for all who are struggling with illness, disease, poverty and mistreatment. Give them your strength in body and soul, and provide them with the assurance of your everlasting faithfulness even amid the hardest times imaginable.

We pray all this in the powerful name of your son our Savior, Jesus Christ, using the words that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**