

A Blessing and a Curse

Luke 6:17-26
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First Presbyterian Church
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There's an old story – a true one – about a man who had a hard life. When he was 7 years old, his family was evicted from their home. When he was 9, his mother suddenly died. At 22, he lost his job as a store clerk.

He'd always wanted to go to law school, but his education wasn't good enough. He went into business instead, and at age 23 became a partner in a small store. Three years later, his partner died, leaving a huge debt that took him years to repay. At 28, he asked the woman he'd been courting for years to marry him. She said no.

At 37, his luck seemed to change when he was elected to Congress on his first try! But then, two years later, he was voted out. At 41, his 4-year-old son died. At 45, he ran for the Senate and lost. At 47, he failed as the vice-presidential candidate. At 49, he ran for the Senate again and lost. Then, at age 51, he was elected president of the United States. His name was Abraham Lincoln.

Who's to say what's a blessing and what's a curse in the great scheme of things? From our human perspective, what looks like the greatest misfortune may, in a God's-eye view, really be our salvation.

This is what Jesus preached in the passage we just heard read from Luke. Jesus lived at a time of great need. People all around him were suffering from a lack of food and clothing and shelter. If the head of the household died, those left behind often had no standing in society, no way to support themselves. And those who – like Jesus and his followers – opposed unjust systems, they were shunned and persecuted.

Despite their desperate need that things change for the better, they had no way to make it happen. So Jesus comes to assure them that things will change, saying, "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 on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets." And then he talks about those whose ancestors rejected the prophets of Israel, -the word of God- saying, "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."

Jesus is not saying that those who are relatively wealthy, well-fed, happy and popular are cursed. But he is saying that those who reject the prophets – the prophetic truth as God sees it – they are cursed, as are all those who embrace false prophets and the lies that lead people astray.

And he's warning such people that any wealth and happiness and popularity they receive will not save them. The only way for anyone to truly enjoy what money, happiness and popularity they have is by using it in ministry to others for the glory of God. And that is just so hard for so many people – particularly those who have it all. In fact, it is often those who have less – those who know what it's like to go without – who are more generous and giving.

Take for example, Oseola McCarty, who received an honorary degree from Harvard for her act of giving. As described by Peter Gomes in his book titled "The Good Book," Miss McCarty was a black laundress from Mississippi who scrimped and saved from her meager resources to provide a scholarship of \$300,000 to a local black college, so that she might help others.¹

Miss McCarty knew what Jesus meant when he said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." She shows us that, by giving what we can to help someone in need – regardless of how much or how little we have – we step out of this world and into the kingdom of God, providing the means and the inspiration for others to follow.

That's our calling as followers of Jesus – to walk where he walked so that we might minister as he ministered, lead as he led. As Luke describes it, "Jesus came down (the mountain) 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", all kinds of different people.

To minister as Jesus ministered, lead as he led, we must meet people where they are – get on the same level with them, with people from all areas of life. Jesus calls us to be the ones who say to another, "Blessed are you who are poor, ... who are hungry, ... who are weeping," who are hated, and then he calls on us to do what we can to fulfill that blessing, by giving to the poor, feeding the hungry, comforting those who weep and reassuring those who feel hated and excluded.

For instance, in the Wednesday Night Live class I'm leading on The Lord's Prayer, this week's video segment has Adam Hamilton talking about what it is for people to be hungry and what we are to do in response to it. He says, "Part of bringing God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven is being mindful of people who may not have enough and making sure that I share, that we share ... God answers that prayer for daily bread through people. ... God doesn't send angels with wings to drop (off) food; he sends angels with flesh, like us."

¹ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996), 307-308.

In other words, whether or not you are a blessing in the life of another person depends on how you experience the blessings of your life. Are they given so that you can be rich, well fed, happy and popular, or do you see the blessings of your life as a means to bless the lives of others, regardless of how much or how little you have? That's a question for us all. If we answer it faithfully, then God blesses us, and he blesses others through us.

As Adam Hamilton says in the video, "In the midst of providing for the needs of other people, you find your need met for a different kind of daily bread – the need for meaning and purpose and joy and feeling like you're a part of something God is doing."

That's such great news, isn't it?! But what about those times when you don't have what it takes to be a blessing to someone else? In those times when you find yourself truly poor financially or spiritually, hungry in body or soul, weeping openly or in secret, hated by others and excluded from the group – in those times of dire need, know that Jesus is here for you to bless you and to keep you, regardless of how hopeless things feel.

When Jesus says blessed are you who are poor, hungry, weeping or feeling left out and rejected, he's bearing witness to the truth that God is still at work in your life, that God will inevitably bless you, if you keep the faith and draw close to God and lean on God's people for support.

What this blessing will look like and when it will come, we don't really know. God may bless us some day with what we most desire. Or perhaps, God may bless us *through* what we desire but don't receive. Either way, we know that God is faithful, and God will help us overcome our greatest struggles, both individually and as the world at large.

After all, it was Helen Keller – the blind and deaf mute who overcame her disabilities – who once said, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it." So remember, God's way of blessing us sometimes is not to remove the cause of our struggle, but to give us the faith and the power and the support to overcome our struggles, as we wait for that day when Christ will make all things new again. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of love, we are grateful for the love you have shown us in Christ and through other people, 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 all else. Send your Spirit of love and strength and healing all those dealing with illness and disease, and your Spirit of protection and wellness for those facing surgeries and other medical procedures.

We pray also for our country, Lord, that we and all the world would be free from the illness, threat, restrictions of the pandemic. And that our children and teachers, parents and care givers, workforce and political systems would be renewed by the Spirit of mutual support and love that you send upon us daily.

Help us to receive your Spirit and to share its blessings with others.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, who showed us what it is to be a blessing in this world, and who showed us how to pray for ourselves and for others and for all the world, 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.