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Luke 6:12-26

THE RULES OF THE GAME

Imagine you are a school teacher. It's recess time and you walk out onto the playground where the students are running all around. And you begin to pick students out one by one, organizing them into a group. It is clear to the children that you are organizing some kind of a game. But what game will it be? Kick ball? Tag? Basketball? Baseball? Soccer? The students debate among themselves because as soon as they know what the game is, they will know the rules that apply. Let's imagine that you tell the children that they will be playing volleyball. You divide them into two teams, one on either side of the net. The children know how this game is played and are eager to get started. But then you tell them that they will be playing by a new set of rules. Instead of hitting the ball over the net, they will have to run with the ball *under* the net. And then they have to bounce the ball twice on the ground before kicking it to their team members. And the students stare at you with open mouths because, based on these strange new rules, the game the children once knew is now almost unrecognizable.

This is not too far off from what Jesus is doing in our scripture passage today. Jesus comes down from the mountain where he has been praying, and he begins to pick out twelve disciples. Jesus doesn't have to explain what he is doing because it would have been obvious: Jesus is assembling team Israel. The number twelve would have been part of their collective memory—when God chose the twelve tribes of Israel to be God's special people through whom God would fulfill God's purposes for the world. So now, Jesus is assembling a new team to carry out God's purposes.

The disciples may have been pretty excited to be chosen to play for the team and may have thought they understood the rules of the game. Some of them might have expected that the game would include a grand and mighty restoration of Israel to its rightful glory by forcefully overthrowing their Roman oppressors. Others may have understood that Jesus was choosing them to hold positions of status and importance within their community. Maybe the disciples thought this was going to be their chance to shine, to advance in society, to gain public affirmation. And the team was ready for the game.

But then Jesus stuns them by giving them new rules for the game. Those rules are what we find in the Beatitudes, his lesson that begins with four blessings and is followed by four corresponding woes. Jesus' new set of rules were a shocking reversal to the rules that governed and shaped their society. When I talk about "rules" I'm not speaking so much about formal laws as I am the understood assumptions and conventional wisdom that undergirds a community.

We know Jesus was giving these new rules specifically to the disciples because the gospel writer Luke tells us that before delivering this lesson, Jesus looks directly at his disciples. This lesson is for his team. Jesus wants to instruct them that the game he is calling them to play, the way of God, will be played by a completely new set of rules. And these new rules are so radically different from the conventional rules the disciples are used to, that they render the social and religious game almost unrecognizable.

For example, in the social and religious rules of Jesus' society, to be poor, hungry, or suffering meant you were out of favor with God. You had displeased God in some way. And conversely, to have wealth, to enjoy good health, to be prosperous was evidence of God's blessings upon you. We can find this same mentality around us today. The poor and the vulnerable are often judged and blamed for their misfortunes. We've heard those kinds of

judgments, like: “They’re just lazy,” or “They shouldn’t have crossed the border without proper documentation.” And yet, look at how our society affirms the wealthy and the successful. We manage to disregard all the advantages or even short cuts a wealthy person may have enjoyed on their way up, choosing to focus only on their worthiness.

Have you noticed how we tend to use the language of blessing when we are acknowledging our good fortune. If our health is good, if our careers are successful, if our bank account is strong, we might say, “I’m so blessed.” And there is absolutely nothing wrong with acknowledging our blessings. We *should* be grateful and express our gratitude and live in humility of our good fortune. But think about what that language can also convey: “I’m so blessed” can convey the notion that somehow these advantages are a sign of God’s special approval. And that could convey the idea that those people without these advantages or comforts are *not* blessed by God.

This was the very set of social rules Jesus was confronting in our reading today. Jesus has assembled his team but he wants them to understand that if they are to play his game, they will need to understand that the realm of God operates by completely different rules.

If we think about it, “blessed” people tend to exist, in our minds at least, on a higher plain. We have lifted them up, or ourselves, in our opinion and in our esteem. But notice what Jesus does here in our passage. Jesus is up on a mountain praying but he comes down to join the crowds “on a level place.” This sermon is sometimes referred to as the Sermon on the Plain, because that is where Luke tells us Jesus gave this lesson—on a level place. The blessed one does not stand *above* but *with* the people, side by side with them in their pain and struggle and suffering. And in doing so, he teaches his disciples through both his words and his example about the new rules of the realm of God.

Jesus teaches them that it is not the elite who are blessed by God, it is not the successful who are blessed by God, it is not those who live in mansions and drive nice cars who are blessed, it is not those who have strong retirement funds who are blessed by God. Instead, God's special attention is directed to the poor, and to the hungry, and to those who are hated, and to those who are crying out in pain and despair. All those whom society has ignored, dishonored, and blamed are the very people whom God values and cherishes.

And then, still looking at the disciples, still directing this message to the disciples, Jesus delivers a set of "woes," a set of corresponding warnings. "Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full now, woe to you who are laughing now, woe to you when people speak well of you." The social, religious, and interpersonal rules are upended!

Let me offer a bit of interpretation about the word "woe." In Greek, this word is used as an exclamation of grief. What we hear Jesus expressing here is grief mingled with a warning for all who find themselves well positioned and self-satisfied in life. Now, let's be clear about something. Jesus is not saying that there is something virtuous about being about being poor or hungry. He is not saying there is something honorable about being oppressed or filled with sorrow. God is not just merely reversing the rules of the game so now the poor are on top and the rich are on the bottom. Jesus is not advocating "let's overthrow the rich and life will be better." Because if that is all Jesus is advocating, then God ends up playing the same broken game we play, just in reverse. Some people on top. Some people on the bottom. There would be no good news in simply reversing our broken order of things.

Rather, Jesus extends an invitation to a game played with brand new rules. There is enough grace and love for everyone. In the very next sentence after Jesus delivers these

beatitudes, he tells his followers to “love your enemies.” Jesus is defying the games we play in which people are divided into good and bad, right and wrong, those worthy of love and those not worthy of love. And Jesus gives us new rules to live by.

But Jesus expresses woe, both a sorrow and a warning, to the rich and comfortable, to people a lot like us, because he knows that they are the ones most likely to continue to live by the world’s consolations. They are the ones who benefit from the world’s rules as they currently exist. They are the ones who resist change and God’s reordering of this world. Woe to them, woe to us. The rich, the full, the self-satisfied, the people who have received social approval. Woe to you when all speak well of you. Is there anything quite as intoxicating as the praise of others? Woe to us when we live according to such rules. Woe to us when we strive for all the world’s consolations. Because when we do so, how far we are from the realm of God.

Jesus calls his disciples, you and me, to come down from our lofty places and expectations, and comforts, and to join him on a level place among the least and the forgotten, the vulnerable and the broken, that we may discover what a blessing truly is.