

LEVELLING THE FIELD

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

What does it mean to be “blessed”? If you turn your attention to various forms of social media and so a search of the word “blessed” then you’ll find large number of posts featuring photos of sunny vacation spots, fancy cars, new babies, tables full of food, toned bodies, graduations, new marriages, business start-ups, successes and abundance.

We have, on occasion, spoken in sermons and Bible studies about what is called the prosperity gospel. This is a form of theology that believes that through complete faithfulness to God in all that one does—through prayer and obedience and confession and donating to religious organizations—God will respond with blessings. And those who aren’t experiencing blessings—who aren’t getting the job promotion, or who have a child with undiagnosed health issues, or who don’t have enough money to pay off their debt, let alone go on a tropical vacation, well, according to the prosperity gospel, those people just aren’t expressing their faith with enough consistency or fervour or devotion.

You can see the problem with this kind of belief.

The thing is, all those things that people label as blessings—the special moments, great achievements, material goods, abundance of food—they are good things. But the when the word “blessed” is posted in connection with these kinds of images, it seems to say there is only one way God blesses us: by giving us obviously good things. Have we defined the blessed life as one of abundance and power, popularity and success? And if so, what does that mean for those who do not experience such overt forms of goodness? For those who suffer? What does that mean for the woman seeking a free drop-in meal every day? What does that mean for the father of two young kids who just lost his job? What does that mean for the trans woman who is consistently discriminated against and taunted while just trying to go buy groceries? What does that mean for the Indigenous elder who struggles with addiction and generational trauma? If they do not experience blessings in the easy and enriching way that so many others do, does that make them cursed?

I recently read an interview with Father Greg Boyle. Father Greg is a Jesuit priest and the founder of Homeboy Industries, which is the largest gang-intervention, rehabilitation, and re-entry program in the world. From 1986 to 1992 Father Greg served as the pastor of a church that was, at the time, the poorest Catholic parish in Los Angeles and also

had the highest concentration of gang activity in the city. During those years, Father Greg witnessed the disastrous and dreadful impact of gang violence on his community. And while law enforcement tactics and criminal justice policies turned to harsh forms of cracking down and mass incarceration as the way to end gang violence, Father Greg and his community members “adopted what was a radical approach at the time: treat gang members as human beings.”¹

And so began the early days of what is now Homeboy Industries: a group that employs and trains former gang members in a range of social enterprises, and also provides critical services to thousands of people who walk through its doors every year seeking a better life. Father Greg has been beside those living difficult, troubled, and impoverished lives. He has seen suffering. He knows brokenness. He has buried far too many kids who were killed far too young through gang violence and walked alongside their families and friends as they grieved and sought a more hopeful outcome for other children and youth in their neighbourhood. Something father Greg says is that “gang violence is about a lethal absence of hope.”

What I found interesting in the interview I read with Father Greg is that, when asked about his own childhood and upbringing, he brought up the idea of choices. He pointed out that so many people will point to gang members making bad choices as being the heart of the issue. But as a gang member said to him once, “what choice did I have? I was born into this mess.” And, Father Greg says, it’s true. He feels that he himself won a series of lotteries: the parent lottery, the sibling lottery, the ZIP code lottery, the education lottery. And he doesn’t use the word “blessed” to describe this situation. Rather, he feels lucky. And recognizes that not everyone is lucky. The poor have to navigate things that he never even knew existed in his own upbringing. And he thinks this is important to underscore. So much of what he sees and experiences in the poorest areas of Los Angeles isn’t about right and wrong. It isn’t about good choices. As he says, “It’s about the fact that the field is not level.”

Our Scripture today is often dubbed “The Sermon on the Plain.” Why is it called this? Because Luke draws our attention to the fact that Jesus is on a plain, a level playing field, with the multitude of people who have come to see him and be healed and restored. Luke doesn’t set Jesus up on a hill or a mountain. For Luke it is important that Jesus is on the same level as everyone else—his power is not meant to make him seem greater or more important or more worthy than anyone else, because his power isn’t about gaining for for himself, it’s about tending to others with love and compassion.

¹ Homeboy Industries, <https://homeboyindustries.org/our-story/father-greg/>

It's about listening. It's about showing that the way to deal with crowds of the broken and hurting isn't to ignore them or force them to do some sort of task or make some sort of payment in return for health, but to act with grace and embrace them in humility as fellow humans who need love and care, forgiveness and healing.

The blessings and woes that follow open up a different world view for both the listeners back then and for many still today: being wealthy, well-fed, and well-liked isn't the goal in God's realm. While the word "blessed" may be used with great frequency by those who ascribe to the prosperity gospel, or by those who have their own definition of what it means to be blessed, this passage makes it clear that praising God exclusively to gain wealth, health, and respect is not the true meaning of blessing.

Rather, you're blessed if you're poor, when you've lost it all. Because the truth is you haven't actually lost it all—God's realm is and always will be there for the finding. When you have nothing, it's easier to start doing the looking. And you're blessed if you're hungry—you are ready to accept the invitation to come sit and eat at the Lord's table. You're blessed if you've done everything you can and all that seems left to do is cry. Because joy comes with morning, with a new awakening into a new day, a new life. And you're blessed whenever someone smears your name to discredit your faith in the One who loves with grace and heals with compassion. To quote Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage from his Bible translation called *The Message*, "What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don't like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds."

In typical Jesus form, things are turned right upside down. What we assume to be blessings are never mentioned—no material objects, no accumulation of money, no praise over status-lifting achievements. The blessings Jesus describes aren't shallow, passing, or temporary. They induce a deep, enduring sense of satisfaction. This isn't the good feeling that warms us for a moment and then fades. This is a rooted, deep-in-your-gut joy that doesn't shift with circumstances.

A picture of the blessed life is also found in our reading from Jeremiah today. According to the prophet, blessings come from having radical trust in God. When putting all our faith in, as the scripture phrases it, "mere mortals," we leave ourselves vulnerable and rootless. Faith without trust in God provides no good soil to root into and we are ill-prepared for the trials that confront us. Jeremiah compares this kind of faith to a shrub in the desert—it is alone and has no relief from drought. But then Jeremiah paints a different picture; one of the faithful who do trust in God. He compares them to a tree

planted near water; the roots have somewhere to turn and grow and receive nourishment, even in times of drought. This is the thing: both the shrub in the desert and the tree near the water source will experience times of drought; believing in God doesn't cushion or exempt anyone from suffering. The difference is that the latter can find ways to thrive because they send out their roots toward the stream, giving them the ability to continue to produce green leaves, to produce fruit.

And it's not all doom and gloom if you're that lone cactus in the desert. Jeremiah's words to those who depend upon "mere mortals" don't guarantee an untimely end; they work as a warning. This is the way of prophets: the words they speak on behalf of God aren't written in stone. They are meant to sound alarm bells, to warn listeners of what could happen if they don't change their ways, if they don't turn toward God and hold faith in God. It will leave them rootless and drifting like tumbleweed across a desert floor. But there is always the opportunity to turn toward the blessings that last.

And this is much like what we see from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. We hear about who will be blessed and gain a sense of why that is, but we also hear the opposite, the woes. Woes are not curses, but they are forms of trouble or distress. So these woes also act as a warning or calling to attention. Because trouble is ahead if you think your riches will get you out of any situation and keep you aloft. Trouble is ahead if you feel totally satisfied with yourself and don't intend to change a thing, because some day that ideal will come crashing down and you'll hunger for something more than a lonely self-satisfied life. Trouble is ahead if you think life is all laughter and fun and games, because there will be suffering, and when it comes you'll be overwhelmed and unprepared to meet it. Trouble is ahead if you live for others, looking to always please and indulge them and gain their approval. You need to live into the truth, not popularity.

Father Greg knows how blessings work and how, in so many ways, what happens to us in this world, especially those he connects with from gangs, is based on luck, chance, happenstance. And so, he and his community work to try and level the field—to provide opportunities for those who have never known how to do anything but please others in order to survive, or assume that the way forward is to gain riches, or numb the suffering they experience with drugs and alcohol—to show them a different kind of life. Blessed are the poor, the gang members, the homeless, the addicted, the unemployed, the famished because they know the reality of their situation. They are totally dependent on God and therefore are disposed to entrust themselves to God's care and mercy, which is the foundation of grace and a right relationship with God.

In our world today there are so many gaps that keep us from being on a level plain. You don't have to look far to see and understand the ways that wealth gaps, education gaps, health gaps, and food deserts, amongst other gaps and failures, mark the two sides of blessings and woes. A quick analysis of our world suggests that the majority don't really want to be on a level playing field, otherwise the rich would not be as rich and the poor would not be as poor. And so, it is these gaps that we are called to address. A great deal of these gaps stem from systemic oppression and inequality that, yes, are difficult to change or change quickly. But we can live into the values of what Jesus preached about all those years ago right now. We don't have to wait. We are called to ensure everyone, especially those who are suffering, know that the blessings Jesus preaches about on that plain point to the truth that God sees them, loves them, and wants them to thrive. And that the woes are a warning to all hearers that they are called to live with attention and generosity toward their neighbours, even as God is attentive and generous.

What do you value? What do you reject? Where do you stand? Is it on a hill? Is it in a valley? Or do you seek to stand and gather with as many others as you can on that level field, ready to offer help, healing, and restoration in the ways that Christ leads us to do? Amen.