

Epiphany 6, 2022, St Luke's

Blessing and curse; blessing and woe -- these are definitely part of our readings today. It seems like a perfect set-up for a fire and brimstone revival and altar call. Or a perhaps a prosperity gospel proclaiming the more we have the more blessed we are by God -- our material wealth determining our standing with God. Since neither are part of my gifts, I am left to wrestle with curse and blessing. Blessing and woe.

How do we hear blessing? I can remember hearing the Gospel read with "Happy are those." I can easily think of "blessing" as being in a state of happiness. Where blessing is an emotion. I suspect this isn't what either Jeremiah or Jesus was trying to convey. So what does blessed mean?

One dictionary defined blessing as "enjoying great happiness; blissful." So I looked up those two words. It defined "happy" as "favored by circumstances; lucky; fortunate; great pleasures." Bliss was defined with words such as "great joy, ecstasy, intense pleasure, spiritual joy, and rapture." Is it any wonder that we encounter some difficulty understanding this word?

Turning to the 6-volume Anchor Bible Dictionary helped me engage these blessings and woes or curses. Blessing is about our standing before God. Being favored by God.

Turning to woe and cursed, they each share similar meanings. It is about God withdrawing from us, withdrawing or denying favor and benefits because we have been found guilty. Hear again the blessings and woes in Luke with these words. God favors those who are poor. God favors those who are hungry. God favors those who weep. God favors those who are reviled on account of Jesus. God finds guilty those who are rich. God denies favor to those who are full. God withdraws benefits to those whom others speak well.

Ok I am uncomfortable. I have much, I am full, and others mostly speak well of me. So am I cursed? Am I found guilty by God? Do I fall into the cursed and woe column on God's list? It is important to remember that God's blessing or God's favor is not a state of bliss. It is not an emotion, nor is it material rewards. Rather God's blessing is given or withheld based upon how followers then -- and we today -- live our lives.

Epiphany 6, 2022, St Luke's

Blessed describes a devotion to a certain way of life, a life committed to a certain course of action and a way of behaving or not behaving. It is about honoring God with all that we say, all that we do, and all that we have. Woe and cursed is the exact opposite. It defines what happens when we follow a different path than one that honors God, honors Jesus.

Turning to Jeremiah, he like Moses, was a very reluctant prophet. Like Moses, Jeremiah appealed to the Torah as the ethical basis for the People of God to live their lives. Like Moses, Jeremiah described the consequences of obedience and disobedience by contrasting a life marked by 'blessings' and one marked by 'curses' (Deut. 28). Those who obey the law, obey the way of God, those who walk the faithful, righteous life will be blessed by God. Those who trust in God and God alone will be blessed.

You see, for Jeremiah, it came down to trust. A lived trust in God. Those who put their trust in mortals rather than God were cursed; those whose trust rested firmly and deeply in God were blessed. Jeremiah was reminding the people of God about the dangers of trusting in idols and the pitfalls of placing one's confidence in human beings and not in God.

Those who trust in humans or things that humans create will never flourish any more than a parched shrub in a desert. A shrub desperately needing water, life-giving, life-sustaining water. Those who trust in God are like a tree planted by water whose roots are long and deep, sprouting out into the stream.

As disciples we are called to be rooted in God like a tree that is deeply rooted. So, what does it mean for a tree to be deeply rooted? In drought, a deeply rooted tree has better chance of finding water. In being firmly grounded it is less likely to blow over unlike shallow rooted trees when strong winds blow through. And, where there are several trees, the roots can wind around each other, providing for a stronger tree in times of storm. God wants us to be deeply rooted, God yearns for our hearts to be given to following Jesus; -- and somewhere within our hearts, we too yearn for God and for those deep roots.

Yet our greatest failures as humans stems from our hearts. Our hearts may confess trust in God, but then our hearts seem to negotiate with idols. We might find ourselves striving for things like money, status, security, comfort. Perhaps seeking blinders to the pain and suffering around us and in our world. Perhaps turning a blind eye to injustice.

Epiphany 6, 2022, St Luke's

Likewise, our hearts may call on the name of God, but then it may seem at times that our hearts fail or even refuse to obey God's ways. Perhaps we seek comfort in material things or seek security in money or possessions rather than in God. Perhaps we seek affirmation of our worth using the values of our culture and our world rather than the values of Jesus.

We want to trust in God, to live a righteous and faithful life, a life deeply rooted in Jesus. Yet, at the same time, I suspect for many of us, we also want to live a life grounded in the world, a life deeply rooted in our culture's values and seductions. So we find ourselves straddling the fence.

In both Jeremiah and Jesus, they have issued a call to action for disciples and for churches across the ages. A call to live an ethical life as defined by God and not by culture and certainly not by our own brokenness. Edwin Schweizer, a noted theologian, wrote in his reflection on blessings and woes in Luke, that Jesus' expectation is that the disciples then and we today will reorient ourselves, our actions and our relationships to reverse social injustice so that we might gain God's favor.

So instead of fire and brimstone; instead of preaching prosperity, I find myself drawn to hope – a hope that can overcome my failings. What hope is there for us that straddle the fence, attempting to live in both worlds?

There is the hope of our faith, the hope of our baptism. The hope that God's love will work in us and through us so that we, over time, are changed, transformed more and more into Christ's likeness. That the light of Christ will grow brighter and brighter, moving from flickers to a strong, steady beacon for others so they too can see the light of Christ. And there is the hope that God's mercy is abundant, and God's grace is sufficient.

Hear again the prayer of our collect today: "O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: mercifully accept our prayers, and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace...." It is only through God's grace that we can even hope to live an obedient life, a righteous life, a life grounded in God. It is only through God's abundant and never-ending grace that we can become deeply rooted in Jesus.

Epiphany 6, 2022, St Luke's

I invite you to join with me in seeking and being open to being more and more grounded in God. To being open to trusting God over everything and everyone else. God is inviting us to be deeply rooted. God is inviting us to be tightly entwined with Father, Son, and Spirit and with the Body of Christ, the church.

The challenge, at least for me, is to turn, over and over, away from rooted-ness in the world and then, as Schweizer wrote, to work to reorient ourselves, our actions and our relationships to reverse social injustice so that we might live in God's favor.

Will you -- will we -- sink our roots and our hearts so deeply into God that we might be among those Jesus called blessed?