**February 17, 2019**

**Luke 6:17-26**

Jesus’ sermon in Luke is not the happy Beatitudes people remember from Matthew. Instead, this is a list of stark contrasts: “Blessed are the poor; *woe* to the rich… Blessed are the hungry; *woe* to the full… Blessed are the weeping; *woe* to the laughing… Blessed are the excluded ones; *woe* to the popular.” Within these states of being, it’s curious that God is not a lead actor. God was not blessing or cursing. God was not giving or taking. God was the invisible actor, standing in the wings, staying in God’s territory preparing the Kingdom. We might assume that God is the one who *will fill* the hungry, and *will bring* laughter to those who are weeping, but that is *not* explicit in the text. Which is a problem, or at least a HUGE question at the front of my mind. Where is God?

Isn’t Jesus supposed to be teaching us about God? Isn’t Jesus supposed to be telling us how to become better people – better followers of God? This doesn’t help us do anything other than enjoy or bemoan whatever state we are in. There is no reason (righteousness or sinfulness) given that is bringing about the blessedness or woefulness. There is no One or way to lead us to change. In some ways, the reading of these verses is what I imagine a fortune telling might be like. Cards are turned over. You get what you get. Who knows what brought this to be? Who knows what powers are at play?

It echoes Ecclesiastes 3: “For everything there is a season… a time to be born, a time to die; a time to kill, a time to heal; a time to weep, a time to laugh; a time to mourn, a time to dance; a time to seek, a time to lose.” The difference is that *Ecclesiastes* ends that famous passage with the tag, “God makes everything suitable for its time.”

But that tag is not in the Gospel. God didn’t (explicitly) make these people blessed or woeful. God didn’t promise change from one way of being or another. There is no sense of intentionality or deservedness here. There is only “blessed” or “woeful.” I don’t know about you, but I know some people who live in those extreme places:

My brother-in-law, Grant, committed suicide last spring after a lifelong battle with mental illness. His struggles couldn’t be contained within his own body and being; they spilled out into his relationships with other people. They made him act out. They brought him trouble in school. They sent him to prison. They prevented him from working with those who wanted to help him. For years. So that when Grant committed suicide, it was not a surprise. The family understood that he was acting out of a place of woe. He was not going to “get better.” There was little hope for an easy or blessed future.

On the other hand, Grant was a man who had the best intentions on his best days. He knew what it was like to live on the edge; he knew no other way of being. He befriended others who also lived on the margins, marginalized and ostracized from society. At his funeral one friend told us how he and Grant got into a fist fight the first time they met, but that over time the two men became like brothers. Grant had talked that friend out of committing suicide once before. Grant had actually talked a number of his friends out of committing suicide. “There’s hope,” he told them. Many people in town remembered how Grant supported the wilderness firefighters. Seeing the lack of funding and resources for the firefighters, Grant organized a water bottle drive, collected thousands of cases of water, then personally delivered supplies to the firefighters.

Grant was a big, bearded tough guy who cruised in his oversized pickup truck. He had tattoos and piercings and clothes that made some people avoid him altogether. But he also had a huge heart. He cared for others as he yearned to be cared for himself. Even though he knew the burden of “woe,” even though he lost hope himself, he did his best to give blessings to others in need.

One of my aunts has also seen more than her share of woe from her place in the margins. Drug usage and an abusive marriage led to brain injuries which eventually grew to aneurysms. Two aneurysms burst, causing further brain damage. Mental illness (be it chemical or physical or other cause) prevents her from holding a job, maintaining friendships or independence, and doing other “normal” things. For decades. She has had many suicidal episodes. There are many reasons for her to cry, “woe.” How much longer must she live like this? When will she enter a season of blessing?

My aunt, like Grant, reaches out to bring blessings to the world. She knows the oppression of woe and thus offers small, simple things to others in hopes that they will escape the woe themselves. She makes yard art and seasonal décor, then randomly sprinkles it around town. One year she adopted a fire hydrant, giving it a Santa suit at Christmas, bunny ears at Easter, and sunglasses for the summer. She cackled with delight as she watched people slow down when they passed it. She loved seeing their surprised smiles. (Note that this is probably illegal and shouldn’t be repeated.) My aunt shares a cup of soup with a sick neighbor. She plays imaginary games with preschoolers. She offers small, simple blessings to the world that likely go unnoticed by people, but to her – and really, to the world – they are so important. Even though she knows the burden of “woe” – maybe even because she has lived so many days of woe, she does her best to bring blessings to the world.

My brother, Charlie, however, has lived a very different life. He hasn’t always had it easy, *per se,* but no matter what nightmare comes, my brother wakes up in a bed of roses. He will go from broke to easy money, and from storms to rainbows. Yes, he has had moments when he has cried “woe,” but relatively speaking, he has received a life of blessings. And to what end? Did he deserve them more than a woeful person? Will he suffer some day as a result?

In some way, I suppose the woeful are also the blessed. The people who live in the margins: the Grants of this world, the people who are weary, the people who are hungry for spiritual and emotional food, the poeple we avoid and ignore. They may know woe, yet they also know the power of blessings; and inasmuch, they are blessed. In the same way, then, those who are blessed also know the fear of loss and woe, and inasmuch, they are woeful. The person who drives a fancy car that cuts you off in traffic, the person with 2.2 kids and a house and a happy marriage, the person who always comes up roses – they know the power of woe. We then find that as we stand around, pointing fingers at “they” and “them,” we begin to realize that they are us.

Most of us don’t know only blessings or woe; most of us live between these two camps. We experience some of both: delighting in times of blessing, and slogging through times of woe. Often, we live both of these at the same time. A new baby comes, but the baby has life-threatening health issues that constantly threaten to steal this beautiful new blessing. A steady job gives you the income you need, as well as unwanted stress from the commute and office drama. A house keeps you warm and dry, but also takes continual time and money and attention. Blessings and woes. Our plate is often full of them both.

As Eugene Peterson translated this passage, “there’s trouble ahead” if we don’t pay attention to our states of being: [[1]](#footnote-1)

You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all. God’s kingdom is there for the finding.

You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry. Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal.

You’re blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning.

Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me.

But it’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you’ll ever get.

And it’s trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long.

And it’s trouble ahead if you think life’s all fun and games. There’s suffering to be met, and you’re going to meet it.

“There’s trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them… Your task is to be true, not popular.

Really, “there’s trouble ahead” if you aren’t paying attention.

There may be no guarantees of blessings. But neither are there guarantees of woes. There is simply a call to attention and community. “There’s trouble ahead if you aren’t paying attention.” There’s trouble ahead when you’re only thinking of yourself. “There’s suffering to be met, and you’re going to meet it.” No matter what blessings or woe may befall you, the world needs us to share goodness. The world is desperate for acts of kindness and joy and love. The world is ravenously hungry for good news. And friends, we have heard the good news.

Our God – our maker and sustainer, redeemer and renewer, our present and our eternity – calls us to life, then calls us into relationship. With God and one another. There are blessings to receive. There are blessings to be shared. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. http://messagebible.com/scripture/?text=luke+6%3A26 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)