



"Blessings and Woes"
Scripture – Luke 6:17-26
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 6, 2022

I suspect many of us would agree with the Reverend Shannon Kershner who says, "If I had my choice, I would be a member of Matthew's church."

For most of us, Matthew's version of the blessings is far more palatable. For one thing, as Matthew tells it, Jesus speaks primarily in spiritual terms. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Who can't relate to that? Sometimes my spiritual life feels parched. Thank you, Jesus, for understanding that when my faith is running thin, I could use a blessing.

In Matthew's version, Jesus says, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted." When our parent or spouse or friend dies, or when we fear for our health, or when we shed tears over violence, or when we are distraught over a child, it is comforting to know that God walks through the valley of the shadow of death with us.

In Matthew's version, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." It buoys our hope that no matter how difficult the barriers, if we strive for a just cause, we will have the assurance that we are on the side of God.

Yes, I would definitely choose Matthew's church over Luke's. However, today, that choice is not ours to make. We have the words of Jesus as found in Luke's gospel.

An obvious question arises: Why are there two different versions of blessings?

One reason may be that the writers of these two gospels have tailored the words of Jesus to their particular congregations. New Testament scholars believe that Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels 50 – 60 years after Jesus' resurrection. Further, it appears that Matthew was addressing Jewish Christians while Luke was writing to Gentile Christians.

That explains why Matthew occasionally claims that an action or teaching of Jesus is a fulfillment of the Jewish prophets. He quotes the Jewish scriptures far more than Luke.

Scholars point out that Matthew refers to Jesus with the Jewish word "rabbi" while Luke employs the Greek word "master."

Matthew hints that Jesus is the new Moses. That likely explains why he says that Jesus went up the mountain to deliver his sermon. It would remind his community of Moses trekking up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.

In Luke, Jesus heads up the mountain to spend time with God in prayer, but when pronouncing his blessings, Luke says that Jesus came *down* the mountain and stood on a *level place*. He demonstrates his solidarity with the people.

What does it mean in 21st century North America to be blessed? Unfortunately, it appears that many have chosen the shallow end of the pool.

To see what she might uncover, a colleague, Robyn Michalove, did a social media search on “#blessed” to see how people apply the word these days. She discovered that on Instagram alone, there are more than 138 million *blessed* hashtags. And to no surprise, she found that many have drained the word of its depth by using it to express gratitude for every conceivable fortunate circumstance. Here are three she found:

Finally replaced my old iPhone with a new one. #blessed
Found the perfect parking spot. #blessed
My favorite ice cream is on sale. #blessed¹

Suffice it to say that the word “Blessed” has fallen on hard times. Partly because of its mind-boggling overuse and partly because it is used for so much that is trivial. Worse, the word blessed is now the trendy word for bragging while attempting to appear as if you are not.

In a well-known newspaper, Jessica Bennett wrote that friends in her social network shared how they have been blessed with “dazzling job promotions, coveted speaking gigs, and front row seats at Fashion Week.” I suspect that last one especially puts a smile on the face of Jesus!

Bennett says, “There’s nothing quite like invoking holiness as a way to brag about your life. Calling something ‘blessed’ has become the go-to term for those who want to boast about an accomplishment while pretending to be humble. (Blessed is also invoked to) fish for a compliment, acknowledge a success without sounding too conceited, or purposely attempt to make others envious.”²

Lest we add *blessed* to the list of words that have been twisted beyond recognition, we remember how Jesus used this grace-filled word. It was to give hope to the poor, the persecuted, and those who mourn.

In Luke, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.” New Testament Professor Luke Timothy Johnson points out that Jesus was not talking about those who were spiritually poor. He clearly meant those “who were economically impoverished.”³

Jesus added, “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how they treated the prophets.”

Then comes the key reason we prefer Matthew’s version to Luke’s version. In Luke, there are not only blessings, but also warnings. Some might even call them threats. “Woe to you who are rich; woe to you who are well fed; woe to you who laugh; woe to you when everyone speaks well of you.”

Luke reminds us that at the time of Jesus there was a sharp division in society between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the powerless. It was a society shot through with injustice, and a key component of the mission of Jesus was to expose the injustice and to share the divine vision of a new day when justice reigns.

Central to Jesus' mission was first, to draw attention to the corrupt system; second, to warn those who were benefiting from the present system; and third, to give hope to those who were victims of the injustice. Jesus made it clear that God never intends for people to be poor or hungry or oppressed, and God will never stop working toward a day when justice and mercy flourish.

To bring these words of Jesus into our day, perhaps they might sound something like this: Blessed are you who stand in line outside of Emmanuel Dining Room to receive your bag lunch. Blessed are you who must choose between paying your electric bill or your rent. Blessed are you who fight the demons of mental illness and walk the streets for hours. Blessed are you who work two jobs so that your children can have a better life than you.

Blessed are you when people hate you and try to exclude you, Rosa Parks, for refusing to give up your seat on the bus to a white man in Montgomery. Woe to you who arrested her and tried to deny her common respect and decency.

Blessed are you who marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge for basic civil rights. Woe to you who were filled with anger and resorted to violence.

"Blessed are you who keep trying to point out to your friends the racism you encounter every day even though they still don't get it."⁴

Blessed are you who mentor an at-risk child so that a better day may appear on the horizon.

Blessed are you who resettle refugees who were forced to flee for their lives.

But, woe to you who believe your chief purpose in life is to acquire more.

Woe to you who have never nurtured a generous spirit.

Woe to you whose security is wrapped up in your portfolio.

Woe to you who work on outward appearance but little time on your soul.

Woe to you who live only on the surface of life and do not know what you lack.

Whenever I hear these blessings and woes of Jesus, it unsettles me because the blessings seem mainly addressed to others, while the woes hit home. Yet the more I live with them, the more I realize that Jesus declares the woes not to condemn, but to clear my vision when my perception becomes blurry. He declares the woes to remind me how easy it is to adopt the values of our culture rather than the principles of God. He declares the woes to point me to where I can find true purpose and peace.

A colleague tells about the time members of her church "traveled to Haiti to help in a clinic. They stayed at a guest house and there was a small sign in the bathroom similar to the ones you find in a hotel. But instead of it saying 'Let us know if you forgot your toothbrush or razor, and the front desk will provide you one,' this Haitian sign read, 'Let us know if there is anything you forgot; we will show you how to live without it.' Those who live without what we normally consider to be essentials may have much to teach us about vulnerability and trust and hope."⁵

May you learn to embrace not only the blessings, but also the woes, so that your heart may come into harmony with the divine heart.

NOTES

1. Robyn Michalove, "#Blessed," *Day1.org*, for February 13, 2022.
2. Jessica Bennett, "They Feel Blessed," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2014.
3. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 106.
4. Shannon J. Kershner, "Sitting in Luke's Church," February 17, 2019.
5. Robyn Michalove, "#Blessed," *Day1.org*, for February 13, 2022.