

2-16-25 Sermon: “Blessed” – Luke 6:17-26

This morning we heard Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, those famous blessings with which Jesus begins his teaching. And I must admit, I get tripped up by the beatitudes, because I have something of a love-hate relationship with the word “blessed.”

The word “blessed” gets thrown around a lot, in both Christian and secular circles. And quite honestly, I’m not sure the people using it actually know what it means. In popular culture, it translates into something between “really lucky” and, “Hey, check out my privilege!” People say things like, “We just got back from a cruise; we’re so blessed!”/...Really? Is *that* God’s blessing?

In church circles, “blessed” is often used of synonym for holy, something related to God. And in the South, “bless” is actually a four-letter word, as in “Oh bless your heart!”

I think we can agree that *none* of these are what Jesus is going for in the beatitudes, when he says, “Blessed are you who are poor, who are hungry, who weep, who are reviled.” He’s not calling them lucky. He’s not calling them holy. And he’s surely not trying to passively-aggressively insult their intelligence, all the while wearing a sweet, church-lady smile.

The first psalm uses the same word that Jesus uses – “blessed” – but here, it is translated “happy.” *Happy* are those who delight in the law of the Lord, and on God’s law they meditate day and night.”

This gets a little closer, I think, to what Jesus is trying to say. These people who are “blessed” are on the right path: they are close to God; they have cause to rejoice. But would we say, “Happy are the poor, the hungry, the weeping?” No, that’s not quite it.

The best explanation I’ve heard of this word – blessed – comes from Christian historian and author Kate Bowler. “The act of blessing,” Kate says, “is the strange and vital work of noticing what is true about God and ourselves. And sometimes,” she adds, “those truths are downright awful.”¹

Blessing is the work of noticing what is true about God and ourselves.

When Jesus blesses the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the reviled, he is saying something about their relationship to God. There is something more *honest*, more genuine, about their relationship with God than those who are rich, full, laughing, spoken well of. [*Shift, thoughtful*]

Perhaps the blessing *is* the honesty. Because people who poor and hungry, weeping and scorned, know in their bones something that is actually true for all of us: That we are – wholly and utterly – dependent upon God.

That’s not something we like to admit, is it? We want to be self-sufficient, to rely on our own efforts, to be masters of our own destiny. And sometimes, when we have enough luck and privilege, we can delude ourselves into thinking we are the authors of our own good fortune.

But Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who are hungry. Blessed are you who weep, who are hated and scorned by others, because you know reality in the depths of your soul – everything you have comes from God.” There are no bootstraps in the Bible.

Blessing comes from acknowledging our full and utter dependence upon the grace of God. Woe comes from refusing to acknowledge that. “Our God is the God of those who have nothing *but* God.”²

Even as we come to understand Jesus’ blessings, a new question arises: What are we supposed to do with them? And as with many Scriptures, I think the secret here might lie in the grammar, specifically, the pronouns.

Y'all have heard me get on this soapbox before. When Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor," the "you" is second person plural, so he's actually saying, "Blessed are *y'all* who are poor. Blessed are *y'all* who are hungry, blessed are *y'all* who weep; Woe to *y'all* who are rich, etc." These blessings and woes are issued, not to individuals, but to communities. *[Smile]*

And in communities, people are not all the same. Jesus' followers have always been diverse – then and now – so his words, "Blessed are *y'all* who are poor," fall on the ears of the poor and the rich alike. But the blessing is to none of them individually; the blessing is to the community as a *whole*.

I think that means there's some nuance to how we receive these blessings. If we don't know where our next meal is coming from, Jesus' blessing on those who are hungry offers comfort and reassurance that God has not abandoned us. And if our fridge is full of food, then Jesus' blessing is a call to action, to solidarity, to *bless* the hungry in our communities. To the extent that we *are* poor, hungry, weeping, or reviled, Jesus offers us God's blessing. And to the extent that we are *not* poor, hungry, weeping, or reviled, Jesus invites us to *be* a blessing for those who are.

And somewhere in that messy middle, mixed up in the space between the comfort and the call, all of us – *together* – experience God's blessing. *[Pause & Shift]*

3.) Blessing the Unblessable:

Those of you who have been around awhile have heard me talk about Kate Bowler – I quoted her just a moment ago. But anyone who's new (or might have been napping), Kate is a professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School who spent the first part of her life studying a phenomenon called "the Prosperity Gospel."

You've heard this so-called gospel in popular culture, I'm sure. It's televangelists asking for money, Norman Vincent Peale saying, "Think positive, and you'll achieve your dreams!" It's distorted aphorisms like "God helps those who help themselves" – by the way, *y'all*, that's Ben Franklin, not Jesus. It's a version of Christianity that teaches, "Pray hard enough – have enough faith – and God will bless you with health, wealth, and maybe a fancy car!"

If this sounds absurd, it's because it is. It's a perversion of the gospel, let's be clear, but it's out there, and it's quite popular.

What Kate learned, though, is that it's also quite dangerous. Because as she was finishing her dissertation, she was diagnosed – at age 35 – with stage IV colon cancer. And she realized that, while most of us don't actively believe in this prosperity jargon, we church people don't have much language for what to say when the unthinkable happens. We get silent, or we run away. We don't like to be reminded of the truth of our fragile human existence. That we are, wholly and utterly, dependent upon God.

Kate decided that her task was to give the church back that language. So she started a project writing books of blessings for *real* life, seeking to bless the unblessable. *[Smile]* That's what Jesus does in the beatitudes, isn't it? Blessing the unblessable.

So friends, in that spirit, I offer you this blessing from Kate, entitled, A blessing for the life you didn't choose:

Blessed are you when the shock subsides,
when vaguely, you see a line appear
that divides before and after.

You didn't draw it,
and can barely even make it out,
but as surely as minutes add up to hours and days, here you are,
forced into a story you never would have written.

Blessed are you in the tender place
of awe and dread,
wondering how to be whole
when dreams have disappeared
and part of you with them...

Blessed are we, loudly shouting: *Is there anybody here?*
We hear the echo, the shuffle of feet,
the murmur of others
asking the same question,
together in the knowledge
that we are far beyond what we know.

God, show us a glimmer of possibility
in this new constraint,
that small truths will be given back to us.

We are held.

We are safe.

We are loved.

We are loved.

We are loved.

Amen.

¹ Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days* (Convergent Books: New York, 2023), p. xix.

² Feasting, Homiletical.