

What Does It Mean to Be Blessed?  
Luke 6:17-26  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
February 17, 2019  
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For many of we church people, when we hear the word “beatitudes” or start to hear the refrain of “blessed are the poor...blessed are the hungry...” it is again a cross-stitch-pillow-moment. Many of us may have first learned those words because they were printed on a wall hanging or a throw pillow or a bookmark in our grandmother’s home or the church of our childhood. And when we read them casually, we often find them comforting. Without even really listening to the exact words, we fall into the rhythm of the refrain and we hear again and again the word blessed and we feel just that.

Of course, so often when we hear these words, we hear Matthew’s version which comes from in the midst of the sermon on the mount and, in many ways, is much more sanitized or at least spiritualized.

But today we read Luke’s version. And, if we are really listening, the reality is that they will trouble us. If we are really paying attention, they are not words that we want to read from a throw pillow every time we sit down on the couch. Rather they are words that challenge us...that ask us hard questions...that compel us to keep becoming those who are living more closely to the kin-dom of God.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich,

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for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”<sup>1</sup>

See, if we are listening we note that there are a few significant differences between Matthew’s version and Luke’s. And today we have Luke’s to deal with.

So, what is significant here? First, Luke doesn’t talk about the poor in spirit or those who hunger for righteousness, but Luke talks about the poor and hungry. Luke talks about the very realities of poverty and being disenfranchised. And Luke names these not as realities that are punishment for sins, not as realities that deserve our pity, but rather as situations into which God comes, people for whom God shows up.

The other significant difference is that while Matthew gives us a list of blessings, Luke matches every blessing with a woe. And again, this is hard stuff especially because Luke is talking about the real stuff of our lives and our economy. Blessed are the poor...woe to you who are rich. And right there we are ready to stop reading.

And so, in our life and times what typically happens when we hear passages such as this one, similar to what happens when we hear other stories where Jesus talks about money getting in the way of faith, is that we start to ask questions about where the line is...how much is too much...how Jesus would really define “rich”.

We talk about how if we gave everything away, then we would be among those with nothing and we would create a problem for others. We would become dependent on others.

We talk about the fact that even Jesus relied on the hospitality of others – while we don’t see evidence that he had a home of his own, we certainly see him visiting and staying in the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:20-26, NRSV.

homes of others, so somebody has to own a home, somebody has to have food and have a little extra cash in order to be able to receive the Jesuses of our world, right?

Or, the other thing we like to do is to point to everyone who has more and bigger, and then to remind ourselves that we are living a pretty simple, conservative life. So, when he names woe to the rich people, Jesus must not be talking about us, right?

Over this most recent Christmas holiday, a friend of mine was home visiting her parents. She and her children drove past the house of her childhood. It is a split-level home built in the 70's. It is about 1400 square feet. As they drove past, her seven-year-old daughter commented about how small the house was – after all they live in a much larger home. My friend was pleased to report that her 13-year-old son quickly replied saying, “That’s actually not really a small house – we just live in a very big house. *That* is how most people live.”

And into conversations such as this one come Jesus’ words – blessed are the poor...woe to you who are rich.

We can spiritualize these words. We can explain them away by finding someone richer by whose standards our choices are modest. We can point out all the good deeds we do and the ways we give and help those who are in need, the ways our abundance is shared.

But, what happens if we really struggle with these ideas?

See, so often we want easy answers. We want to just have a clear line drawn, be given an annual income amount that tells us whether we fall into the category of poor or rich. After all, even if we are identified as rich, at least we would know. If we have to believe that Jesus was actually talking about our relationship with stuff and our values as they align with the systems of this world, then we at least want to know where we fall.

But what if this isn't that easy? What if the point isn't to divide us into groups of the poor who are blessed and the rich who are in trouble? What if the point is instead to give us pause and to give us the opportunity to ask hard questions about where our loyalties lie, about what our priorities are, and about how we are helping or hindering the coming of God's kingdom?

And, friends, this isn't easy. Admittedly it has likely not been easy for people across many places and many centuries, but it is certainly not easy for us. We live in a time when the common values are focused on accumulation, when we see bigger as better, when we want something to show for the hard work we have done, when we only want to present our happy, successful selves for the world to see.

In 1910 the average home size was 1326 square feet for a family of 4.5 people. Today the average home size is 2430 square feet for a family of 2.6 people. In 2015 more 3 stall garages were built than one-bedroom apartments.<sup>2</sup> Add to that our near constant social media presentations where most of us only post the things we are proud of, only the things to be admired. And suddenly we find ourselves in a place where the values of this world so easily overtake the values of Jesus.

Just this week I heard someone talk about how she and her spouse had made a deliberate decision to live in a smaller home – one we would now call a starter home – and to only own one car. She talked about the looks that she gets when people hear her say that, the comments people make as well as her own response both to wonder why others are so concerned with their uncommon choices and also to wonder why we have decided that having bigger and more is so much better.

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics courtesy of Mark Patton, Executive Director, Iowa Valley Habitat for Humanity.

Friends, I have to say, this is stuff I struggle with a lot. Today when I leave here, I will go home to my house that has way more square footage and way more bathrooms than our family needs. This week I will likely wear the same seven outfits that I wore last week even though my closet has many more pieces of clothing in it. If I post anything to social media, it will be my joy at snow fall or my children's successes. I, like many of you, will live in ways that support the values of the world.

And yet, I dream of having a community willing to ask hard questions...not in order that we can all feel guilty about what we have, but in order that we can have real and sincere conversations about priorities and rootedness and what our faith really means in our daily lives.

Even though these are hard conversations, even though when we look around the world we are the rich, it doesn't mean there is no hope. Remember, one of the other differences between Matthew and Luke is that Luke positions Jesus on the plain – he came down to where the people were and he looked at his disciples. The woes don't mean that we are cut off from being part of the Jesus movement, but they do remind us of the obstacles “from distraction to arrogance to missed opportunities for generosity”<sup>3</sup> that so often get in our way. And “these ‘woes’ also function as exhortations, challenging the rich and prestigious [ - challenging us - ] to change [our] ways and join the movement.”<sup>4</sup>

I don't envision that this afternoon every one of us will go home and clean out our closets, put our houses on the market, and move into tiny houses. But I do wonder what would happen if we took seriously Jesus' challenges about our relationships with stuff. I do wonder what would happen if we took seriously Jesus' call for us to create societies of interdependence

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/2/12/blessing-and-woe-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-6>

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rather than independence. I do wonder what would happen if we took seriously Jesus' call to be rooted first in the love and honesty and generosity of God rather than to have our identity shaped by our power, prestige and possessions.

The other day Nancy Richards and I were talking about how year after year Denmark finds itself at the top of the list of happiest nations. Nancy, a Dane herself, was quick to clarify – it's not about happiness as we tend to think of it, but it's really about contentment. The statistics that keep Denmark at the top of the list are about being content, about knowing when you have enough.

What does it mean to be blessed? What if it isn't about accumulation? What if it isn't about bigger and better, newer and nicer? What if it isn't about pressure to always succeed?

What if, instead, it is about finding security in the love of God? What if it is about living with enough so that you have more to share? What if it is about looking in the eyes of Jesus and seeing that we are and that we have enough? Amen.