

Old Testament Lesson—Jeremiah 17:5-10

Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 6:17-26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "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, 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.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that this probably isn't your favorite set of Beatitudes. You may recall Jesus offers a very similar set of “blessings” in Matthew’s gospel.

Many folks find Matthew’s Beatitudes a lot more palatable—a lot easier to digest because, in that gospel, Jesus stops after that familiar list of “blessings.” That list feels pretty comforting compared to what we find here.

You see: In Luke’s gospel, Jesus’s teaching goes on. Instead, the Lukan Christ makes all of us uneasy by adding a series of “woes”: But woe to you who are rich. Woe to you who are full. Woe to you who are laughing. And woe to you when all speak well of you.

Other translations take it even further by calling them “curses.” It’s hard for me, personally, to imagine the Prince of Peace pronouncing “curses” on anyone for any reason. Right? But, here we are. Cursed are you who...Cursed are you when...Cursed are you...

Yeah, I prefer the Jesus that doesn't feel the need to add a list of bad omens, woes, and curses... I mean: Doesn't he make his point well enough with a series of blessings—those blessings that sound so pastoral? How easier it would be for us, perhaps, to just leave it at:

Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry. Blessed are the hated and excluded and reviled and defamed. Blessed are you who...Blessed are you when...Blessed are you...

It can be easy to miss, I think. But both lists build and point to the same thing. Both Luke's "blessings" and "woes" end in the same place.

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.

(In other words: People hated God's prophets—those like Jeremiah and Amos and Elijah—You'd be in good company to be hated like they were)

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

(In other words: People spoke highly—even loved—false prophets. You don't want to be lumped together with them)

Here in Luke's gospel, Jesus is speaking as more than a teacher—more than just a purveyor of wisdom.

He's speaking as a prophet—like the ancient prophets of Israel—as someone called by God to expose injustice and corruption, to shine a light on the struggle of the oppressed. Prophets direct the people's attention to systems and powers and principalities that only serve to keep the "least of these" in their place.

In the days of old, prophets (I should say *authentic* prophets) rarely (if ever) told the masses what they wanted to hear. More often than not, as a matter of fact, they did just the opposite. They ruffled feathers, raised eyebrows, and pronounced God's judgment with righteous indignation.

They pointed out how Israel had fallen short time and again—how they'd neglected the vulnerable and failed to love their neighbors—refused to welcome the stranger.

A prophet, above all else, was in touch with the emotions and passions of God. Part of their job was to channel those emotions and communicate them to God's people.

And as you can imagine: When those the Lord chose to be a city on a hill live as though they've never even heard of the Ten Commandments—when they act as if they couldn't care less about God's most basic laws...well, God's not pleased.

And when God's not pleased, God's prophets reflect that anger and frustration back onto the people.

False prophets, on the other hand, said whatever they needed to say to gain favor and popularity and especially wealth. The words of such charlatans were full of false hope, empty reassurances, and blatant lies.

You see: One of the things I love about Luke's gospel is its unwavering and unapologetic dedication to the lowly. Luke is absolutely committed to those no one else cares about—to those forgotten by the world—those we'd prefer just didn't exist.

With that in mind, it's easier to see why the Jesus of Luke teaches and preaches like a prophet of old—as one with compassion—deeply concerned with basic human rights, decency, and dignity.

In fact, it's really a theme we encounter throughout both testaments, isn't it? That is to say: All the laws and rules and rituals mean nothing if you're not doing the bare minimum of what God requires: doing justice, loving mercy, having basic human empathy for the suffering and *doing* something—*anything* to alleviate their pain.

Yes, Scripture's clear that God shows no partiality. Yes, God loves *everyone* with a redeeming, sacrificial love. Right? We know God doesn't love Iowans more than Texans, bulldogs more than Hawkeyes, or even Presbyterians more than Baptists.

And yet... Scripture's just as clear that our God and Creator is *especially* concerned about the broken and the lost—that our Lord is particularly passionate about those yearning to be free and heard and whole and found and seen. God is somehow closer to those who are hurting.

Friends: I don't think it's a stretch to say that a kind of divine preference exists for the plight of the underserved and the ostracized and enslaved. Biblically speaking, God's heart is moved in a unique way by the struggles of the poor, the hungry, and the sick.

In the same way God heard the cries of the Hebrews and became their Liberator from Egyptian bondage, Christ too came to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, and let the oppressed go free.

It's a matter of doing justice, you see... The Jesus of Luke's gospel won't proclaim a set of blessings for the downcast and downtrodden *without also* hurling a set of woes upon those keeping the downcast and downtrodden in their place.

Whether by their action or inaction, Christ is clear that the powerful and the privileged and provided for who refuse to lift a finger to make their community a fairer and more equitable place are sowing sinful seeds.

Woe to those who refuse to share, who're happily satisfied by the status quo, who can't stomach their less fortunate neighbors being lifted up to their coveted tax bracket.

Woe to those who enrich themselves at the expense of the poor, who perpetuate unjust systems because it benefits them, who pass laws that otherize and dehumanize and serve only the wealthy.

The inconvenient and uncomfortable truth is that the "woes" are necessary—crucial for the kingdom of God to come in its fullness. For the Jesus of Luke's gospel, offering hope and blessings to the "have-nots" isn't enough. That would be like a cheap consolation prize.

No, it isn't enough to just comfort the afflicted. For this Christ, heaven-bent on justice and table-turning, the comfortable must also be afflicted.

No, it isn't enough to just exalt the humble—not for Jesus the prophet. For this Jesus, the humble must also be exalted. (It reminds me of his mother thirty years ago who sung about scattering the proud, lifting the lowly, filling the hungry, and sending the rich away empty.) You recall that "magnificent" song, don't you?

So let's not scoff at the woes. How else are tyrants to be torn from their thrones, if not by the hand of divine justice?

I want to wrap this up by taking a look at what's going on outside the blessings and woes. The context is really important here.

Luke tells us the crowds had come to hear Jesus—to listen to his teachings—and also to be healed of their diseases. That's why they're there. And, as you'd expect, Jesus heals everyone who desires to be healed. No surprise, there.

Throng of people are present—encircling Jesus. They need something from him. They need a message of hope. They need good news. They need his healing power.

And in the middle of all this, Jesus, in the most brilliant of ways, reminds the crowds of the needs around them—and of their responsibility to care for their neighbors—to be a source of hope for those in desperate circumstances.

Pay attention to the way Luke sets the scene here because it's everything. We're told that Jesus *came down with them and stood on a level place*.

Christ came down with the people—standing on their level—looking them in the eyes. He's not content to sit high and mighty on a pedestal. He's one of them! He is among those, like everyone else, who (at times) needs to be fed and comforted and consoled.

He speaks to them on a human level—person to person—beating heart to beating heart.

You see: Matthew's gospel, on the other hand, sets this scene with Jesus preaching on a hillside, looking down on the crowds. And, though that may be better for sightlines, that isn't the message Luke wants us to hear.

In the same way the crowds have come out *en masse* to receive Christ's blessings, those same crowds must also come out *en masse* to be blessings to the poor, the hungry, and the hated. We must be willing to go out and meet everyone with the face of Christ right where they are.

Imagine a world where everyone is willing to come down to a level playing field for the sake of justice and equity.

Imagine a world where everyone tends to the poor and lost and vulnerable with the same determination that drove the crowds out to Jesus in the first place.

Imagine when all of us have as much passion for the well-being of our neighbors as we do for ourselves!

And Imagine the smile on Christ's face when, surrounded by a crowd on a flat plain, he realizes they're not gathered to just be healed; they're gathered to be sent out *to heal*—to heal the wounds of the world, and to minister in his name.

We can be that crowd. And more importantly, we're called to be that crowd.

Blessed are you.

Amen.