

“Take Two”

We all grew up listening to pop music. Inevitably we would hear a song that sounded like something we had heard before. Similarly, today’s Gospel lesson might sound familiar but not exactly as we remember.

Luke like Matthew reports Jesus preaching a set of blessings to the people. But compared to the Sermon on the Mount, Luke’s Sermon on the Plain can feel stark and more condemning than comforting. In Matthew’s Jesus only offers blessings. We can look at his list and figure out where we might fit into the list of eight blessings. Perhaps we are meek, poor in spirit, a peacemaker and so forth. Whatever we conclude there is a blessing for us. Luke’s list is different.

Luke has Jesus offering four blessings and four woes. Luke’s list is very concrete. The blessings are for the poor, the hungry, the weeping and those who are hated because they are associated with the Son of Man. Each of these will be blessed in the Kingdom of God. What should be disconcerting for us is that we are more likely to find ourselves fitting into the list of those who will experience woes.

The categories of woes hit us exactly where we live. Luke reports that Jesus blesses the poor and gives woes to the rich. While most of Jesus’ listeners were actually impoverished, we are not. The poor are getting heaven and all you and I get is woe. The next one tells us that those who are hungry will be filled, while you and I are going to go hungry. The next one is a little less condemning for I know that there are those in this congregation that mourn and look forward to the day when laughter is more plentiful. I doubt there is anyone in this room who is so callous, heartless or indifferent that life is nothing but a source of amusement and that suffering is a joke. Finally, Luke reports that those of us who enjoy hearing people speak well of us, should beware of getting puffed up, for we have conformed to society’s expectations instead of God’s.

By this time in our examination of this passage you and I might feel doomed to an eternity of woe because of the country and circumstances of our birth. Perhaps, we can feel mournful about this judgement laid upon us. We are so well off perhaps we should mourn our good fortune and thereby be blessed. While that circular reasoning may work for you, I do not think that is Jesus’ point.

Regardless of whether Jesus said the Matthew version or the Luke version¹ there is something more at work in both sets of Beatitudes than a literal reading reveals. Rather I think Jesus is using a rhetorical device

¹ There is no reason to believe that he did not use both versions. I am not Jesus but the version I gave at 8 and at 10:30 are ostensibly the same, but there will be differences because I am not reading a script. If I gave this sermon to a different congregation I might have a similar but different focus. I can imagine that Jesus did the same.

common in his preaching—hyperbole. The exaggeration gets our attention and unsettles us. We start wondering where we do fit in to this scheme of blessings and woes. We can start to wonder about fitting into the woe category and how we might move out of it. Perhaps our riches, fullness, and laughter can be put to use caring for the woeful. Perhaps it is a challenge from Jesus to be the ones who share with the poor and hungry and comfort the mournful. Perhaps it is a challenge to stop taking our privileges for granted as if we deserve it, and start seeing it as a gift or a blessing.

Jesus is not in the habit of condemning people. Rather he is likely to bless and heal people and chide the comfortable for their complacency toward the poverty, hunger, and pain that surrounds them. Numerous times he calls the latter and points out how it is the outsider—the Samaritan, the Roman soldier, the sex worker, the tax collector—who is more devout. He is trying to shake us up and get us back on God's path.

All of us who have received a blessing are called to do something specific. Does anyone remember what we are to do with a blessing? Yes, we are to share it. We are blessed so that we can be a blessing. We are not to sit in our comfy chairs and hug all our blessings close. God says to us just as God said to Abram, "I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." We are blessed and to be a blessing.

In the vernacular the saying is "pay it forward." If our bellies are full we can pass on the blessing by giving to a food bank, or working in a soup kitchen so that no one goes hungry. If we have more than another we can share our riches whether those are great riches or relatively meager ones. We can comfort the mourner and help him or her to find something to laugh about again. We can support those who do God's work such as my missionary friends Heidi and Monica whom we pray for each week.

But as God said to Jeremiah, "The heart is devious above all else"² We have the capacity to turn things inside out and upside down for our own purposes. We make the poor and the hungry no good freeloaders. We search to find the one person who abuses our trust and make them the reason to deny kindness and justice to everyone. Jesus admonishes us not to judge.³ Instead we are called to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.⁴

If we can find it in our hearts to do those three things, we are on the way from woeful to blessed. God does not expect perfection for God knows the challenges we face. I think God desire for us, above all else, is to try. There is a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi that encapsulates this calling from God. Turn to page 833 in the Book of Common Prayer and let us say this prayer together. Say it slowly and take in the words and their meaning as we go

² Jeremiah 17:9-10 NRSV

³ Luke 6:37

⁴ Micah 6:8 NRSV

“Lord, make me instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that I receive; it is in pardoning that I am pardoned; and it is in dying that I am born to eternal life. Amen.”⁵

Anglicanism does not have much in the way of dogma, but there is one maxim that is often heard in the Church—*lex orandi, lex credendi*—praying shapes believing. Earnestly praying the Francis prayer can be transformative. Imagine praying the St. Francis prayer one line per day or week or month. Praying one line over and over again until it gets fixed in our hearts so that we become sowers of love, faith, and hope not only for others but in ourselves. We might just be transformed into person who can feel how blessed it is to give, forgive, and give up our ego and our wants in order to live into the life of Christ. His is the life we seek to emulate in some way. He is calling us every day to come and follow. Start today by praying St. Francis’ prayer as simple a practice as that can transform your life and bring you peace and joy beyond anything that you have ever imagined.

⁵ Pronouns were changed to first person singular for emphasis.