

On February 17, 2019, the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Pastor Joel presented the following message based on Luke 6:17-26 and Jesus' *Sermon on the Plain*. It is entitled, "*Blessed or Woed?*"

Are you *blessed* or *woed*? Are you filled with a spirit of hope and gratitude or are you dismayed, constantly wanting for something more? Do you feel the eyes of God looking upon you in God's grace and mercy and kindness, feeling the love and peace of God for and with you? Or are you caught up in your personal concerns about what the gaze of others see in you, are you one who worries about how you look, what "they" may think of you, what your position or status among others is?

Our passage from Luke is often called the *Sermon on the Plain*, and contains both statements of *blessing* and statements of *woe*. It may remind us of the Beatitudes from Matthew's gospel and Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. Luke's version of the Beatitudes is much shorter and the listing more contrasting.

For each "*Blessed are you*" there is a contrasting "*Woe to you*."
"*Blessed are you who are poor*" vs. "*Woe to you who are rich*"
"*Blessed are you who are hungry now*" vs. "*Woe to you who are full now*"
"*Blessed are you who weep now*" vs. "*Woe to you who are laughing now*"
"*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man*." vs. "*Woe to you when all speak well of you*"

We can see here a real call to choose. Jesus is putting before his chosen apostles, as well as all of those who have come to him there on that *level place*, looking for healing and wholeness, and to learn from his teaching, a very clear choice. You may choose to be *blessed* or choose to be *woed*.

And as is characteristic of Luke, we see an emphasis on the poor, the hungry, the

sorrowful, and reviled and excluded as those for whom the *kingdom of God* is available, versus those who have found *kingdoms* of their own making, the rich, well fed, satisfied folk who are well thought of and who seek high reputations.

Also, we find a difference here in Luke from Matthew's more spiritualized version. Where both seem to allude to an end times or eschatological time of blessing and reversal, Matthew seems to point more toward a *heavenly reward*. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*." Where for Luke, the emphasis is on the present moment, a reward experienced in the *here and now*. "*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*."

But is all this believable? Are these words of Jesus grounded in reality, something that people can know and experience in this lifetime, or is this just some kind of heavenly vision of the after-life, a hope for some kind of reversal of fortune, where the simple and good receive their just reward for all of their suffering and pain, and the bad ones pay for the evil and selfish ways they lived. Is this just a way to tell the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the persecuted and excluded, the marginalized and those unwanted and shunned by society, that everything is going to be alright, *someday*? Maybe not in this world, but at least in the next? Is this about placating the desire for justice, quenching the yearning for a more fair and just world, a way to quell the restlessness of those for whom life has not been good. Is this, as Karl Marx stated of religion, nothing more than *an opiate of the masses*? Is that the religion Jesus is preaching?

Doesn't the world really belong to the rich and powerful, the well off, those who know how to manipulate the system, those who

get invited to the fancy parties, who rub elbows with the *important* people, who get to attend the Academy Awards ceremonies and be honored at political and corporate dinners? Certainly the world feels like that. Doesn't it? The world belongs to them, not us.

Was Jesus out of his mind and out of touch with reality when he spoke these words? Or did he possibly know something others don't?

I want to back up just a bit and take a look at something one of the commentators said is often overlooked here in this passage in Luke. (Gay L. Byron, Prof. of New Testament and Christian Origins, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, NY, Feasting, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 359)

Right before Jesus speaks the Beatitudes, Luke tells us, "*And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came forth from him and healed them all. And he **lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said . . .***" Now in Matthew, we are simply told that Jesus "*opened his mouth and taught them.*" In this reference to Jesus *lifting up his eyes* and gazing upon his disciples, Luke is trying to tell us something.

First, Luke shows us the source of these Beatitudes. It is the same source that gives Jesus that power to heal and to cure their diseases, which is the Spirit and presence of God. And throughout the gospels we encounter times when people experience *theophanies*, where they experience the *presence of God* in Jesus.

But here, Luke turns it around, and just as the people and the disciples experience and see God in Jesus' healing power, now it is **God** who *sees* them, through the eyes of Jesus. Luke is trying to tell us here, that as Jesus *lifted up*

his eyes upon them, they experienced the ***gaze of God***. And it is within this *gaze of God*, that we come to know that we are loved and cherished by this God of Grace and Compassion and Mercy, that we find our true happiness, our true peace, our true joy, that we find we are truly ***blessed***.

Last week Kate used this same phrase, ***the gaze of God***, and spoke of it as that experience, that feeling, that we are being ***seen with the eyes of love***. Think of how a child feels when looked upon by a loving grandparent, or the tear-filled look of loved ones who are reunited after a long separation. It is the look of safety, of security, of longing, and of love.

Indeed, if we think of ourselves standing before God, if we visualize ourselves before the *gaze of God*, it should give us a sense that we are truly loved, accepted for who we truly are, and that the less we put between ourselves and God (riches, things that satisfy or pleasure us, desires for honor or status or reputation), to the degree that nothing separates us from God, we will be ***blessed***. It is when we allow the things of life to come between us and God, then we find that the *gaze of God* feels judgmental and woeful.

But the best part about all of this, is that when we feel *blessed*, we can *bless* others. If we can experience in Christ, the *gaze of God's love*, then too, *in Christ* may others experience God's love *through us*. I think that's why we're the church. To be that place, that people, that offers and makes visible the love of God. And what a *blessed* thing it is to *be seen* and *to see with the eyes of love*.

May our God of love, gaze upon us and through us all. Amen.