

Luke 6:17-26 **Strange Blessings**

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

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The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

17 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. 18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 22 Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Humanity. 23 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.

24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25 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. 26 Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Poverty, hunger, grief, persecution. Jesus says, "blessed are you" when you're in the midst of them—but these are really strange blessings. When people use "#Blessed," that's not usually what they're talking about.

I think of Tevya in "Fiddler on the Roof." Right before he launches into "If I were a rich man," he says, "I realize it's no shame to be poor, but it's no great honor,

either.” I’d say, he’s only half right: because isn’t there, honestly, *shame* in being poor?

When you’re poor, people assume there’s something wrong with you. You’re stupid or you’re lazy or you’ve made such bad decisions that you deserve the trouble you’re in.

When you’re poor, people don’t even trust you to *say* that you’re poor—you have to prove it. Rich celebrities get swag bags worth thousands just handed them, no questions asked; but when you’re poor, you have to give your social security number and proof of income just to get a bag of canned goods.

When you’re poor, you stop being a person, and become a problem. People avert their eyes when they walk by you on the street.

You don’t even have to be below the poverty line to experience that sense of shame. All it takes is living or working or going to school or worshipping among people who have significantly more than you. When your church friends make plans for lunch, but you have to make excuses because you can’t afford to eat out. When your classmates come back from vacation talking about their trip to Tahoe,

while the farthest you got was the local payday lender. When your workmates show up with new cars while yours will barely run; when every program on HGTV shows people recoiling in horror because a house doesn't have granite countertops, and you look at your old formica with the ant traps tucked into the corners—what can you feel, but shame?

“Blessed are you poor,” Jesus says. What can he possibly mean by that?

Matthew, too, recounts this sermon, but he remembers it a bit differently. In Matthew, Jesus stands on a mountainside and blesses the poor *in spirit*. In Luke, Jesus stands on a level place and blesses the *poor*. But maybe we make too much of that difference, because, really, what could be more crushing to the spirit than actual, physical poverty? Jesus says, “Blessed are you poor,” but if he offered me the particular “blessing” of poverty, I’d be quick to say, “No, thank you very much!”

There’s no blessing in not being able to afford your medicine. There’s no blessing in watching everything you own get piled onto the curb because you got behind on the rent. There’s no blessing in having your kids taken away from you because you can’t afford to take care of them. No blessing at all.

But that's not what Jesus is talking about. He's not saying that poverty or hunger or grief or persecution are good and desirable things. How could he say that, when he rails at the people who cause these conditions—those who exploit the poor and trample on the vulnerable?

No, Jesus isn't blessing poverty or hunger or grief or persecution: he's blessing *us* when we're caught in them. And here's where I really do prefer Luke's version over Matthew's: While Matthew says, "Blessed are *the* poor in spirit," Luke says, "Blessed are *you* poor." He takes people who are in the most dehumanizing of circumstances, and he speaks to them person-to-person.

A few years ago, I was serving a church that was trying to reconnect with its community. A team of members set up interviews with leaders in the local schools and businesses and service agencies to get a sense of what the greatest needs were in the community, and how the church might be helpful in addressing those needs. It wasn't until later that I realized: we didn't go and talk to the people who were *facing* those needs every day. As though they didn't have anything to add to the conversation!

Later, that same church became part of a rotating shelter for women. Every Wednesday night we shared a meal and conversation with ten to twenty women, and set up air mattresses on the sanctuary floor for them. We got to know them by name and hear their stories, and I was stunned by all the aspects of homelessness that I had never considered.

I didn't know that you could get a fine of several hundred dollars for sleeping in a public place. How did that make sense? If you had several hundred dollars, you probably wouldn't be sleeping in a public place!

I didn't know that you could get a ticket for sleeping in your car, even on a public street. Your car was allowed to spend the night, but you were not. I didn't know that vehicles have more rights than people.

These were just some of the things I learned when I stopped talking *about* homelessness, and started listening *to* the people who were experiencing it.

“Blessed are you poor,” Jesus says. “Blessed are you hungry. Blessed are you who are grieving. Blessed are you when you are reviled for my sake. Blessed are you.”

The blessing isn't the poverty. It isn't the hunger or the grief or the persecution.

The blessing is Jesus—the incarnation of a God who doesn't look past us or over us when we are hurting, but who, when we feel cut off and worthless, comes to us right where we are, lays his hands on our shoulders, looks us straight in the eye, and says, “Blessed are *you*,” and then lifts us up—feeding us, comforting us, and restoring us to our full humanity.

That is the blessing, and, when you are at your lowest, that blessing is for you.

Once we have received that blessing—once we are filled and joyful and comforted and respected—woe to *us* if we don't seek out our neighbors, person-to-person, face-to-face, and share it.