



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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**“Woe, Whoa, Wow!”**

Luke 6:17-26

February 17, 2019

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So... here's our text in a nutshell:

*Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and excluded. Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and well-liked.*<sup>1</sup>

Wow! Did you get that? For any of us who are out of money, out of food, or out of the in crowd, our gospel reading is good news. Take heart; you are blessed. Take heart, and if this is your situation, please don't leave. Because the rest of us, we need you. To most us, Jesus doesn't say "Blessed." He says, "Woe." By the world's standards, many of us hear "Woe" today. Because by the world's standards, many of us are rich, full, happy and well-liked.

Our lectionary reading stings. This week I've struggled with it. I want to edit Jesus' words. When I hear these woes, I want to turn from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Plain to Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Because in Matthew, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" – he enlarges the category to include us all. (Matthew 5:3) In Luke, the Sermon on the Plain is just too ... plain.

Jesus spends time alone on a mountain. He prays through the night. When daylight comes, he chooses twelve followers. He and the twelve hike down the hill. A crowd greets them. These people have come from everywhere. Standing at the foot of the mountain, Jesus looks his newly chosen disciples in the eye and speaks.

*Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and excluded. Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and well-liked.*

And I think, Woe to you, Jesus. This reminds me of the story of a country preacher. His fire and brimstone sermon is receiving positive responses from the congregation, like "You preach it." But then he goes from generic to specific. He starts calling out particular people for their individual misdeeds. One person stands up and shouts, "Hold on there, Reverend, now you have stopped preachin' and started meddlin'!"

Centuries later, we, and the Church universal hear these words and find them awkward, even offensive. Jesus reorders priority and privilege and Luke calls it good news. It is hard to find our place in this text.

So what do we do with Luke's Beatitudes? Does Jesus really mean *poor*? Destitute poor? Homeless poor? Does he mean hungry as in, *literally* hungry? Starving for food? And what about *sad* people? Are those who

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Debie Thomas for her article on February 10, 2019, which has provided shape and language for this sermon.

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2089-blessings-and-woes>

are drowning in grief and despair blessed? And Jesus can't blame us for avoiding unpopular, unlikeable people. He must be exaggerating or speaking figuratively. Maybe he means "*Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and well-liked*," unless you are progressive and generous and live your values." Maybe he's kidding. After all, he does have a good sense of humor. There must be a way to wiggle out of the "woes" column and squeeze in among the "blessed."

Do any of you remember the Jesus Seminar? Back in the 1980s and '90s over a hundred Biblical scholars came together to review 1500 sayings in the Bible attributed to Jesus. This was yet another attempt to recover the Historical Jesus, what Jesus actually said and did. As you can imagine, the whole enterprise generated controversy. They used their scholarly savvy to identify sayings they thought could have actually been spoken by the Historical Jesus. This was a tough bunch! Only eleven of the 1500 sayings made their cut. Of those 11, two are found in today's reading.<sup>2</sup> Here's how those scholars translate our verses:

Congratulations, poor! Congratulations, hungry! Damn you, rich! Damn you full! Damn you laughing!

Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Wow... We can't spiritualize Luke's Beatitudes away. These hard sayings are the real deal. The Sermon on the Plain has become a little too plain.

So Jesus says "Woe to rich, full, happy and well-liked." And we say "Whoa, whoa, whoa" to Jesus. And then, Jesus says "Whoa!" right back to us. Softly, tenderly, gently, firmly, Jesus says, "Whoa." As in: stop, pay attention. "You fill yourselves with the wrong things. I care about you."

There's no way around Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. He claims God's favor does *not* rest on the well fed, the well off, and the well-liked. Instead, it rests on those who have absolutely nothing to fall back on but God. Those who have no social security, no credit line, no immunity, no fan base. Those who have *nothing*.

Luke says to see God's heart we need to look at the world's shamed and desperate people. The wretched, starving, grieving; the rejected. We need to look at them, and see their faces, like the face of the man on our bulletin cover. They are the blessed ones, the fortunate ones. Jesus isn't romanticizing poverty. He's saying those with nothing are blessed because they have a better chance of embracing God as their refuge and strength, their very present help in trouble.

Whoa! So what are we supposed to do? Wallow in guilt? Avoid happiness? No. Jesus doesn't glorify misery. Right before this hard teaching, he eases suffering in every way possible. In the Christian story, pain in and of itself isn't holy or redemptive. From beginning to end, Jesus's ministry is *all about* healing, abundance, liberation, and joy.

Jesus' sermon sounds like heavy-handed advice. But I was reminded by author and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor that the Sermon on the Plain "is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone."<sup>3</sup>

Wow! – There is someone who loves us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves. It doesn't feel good to be criticized, but it can be good to be told the truth, to get to the bottom of things, even when that truth hurts or embarrasses.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.westarinstitute.org/projects/the-jesus-seminar/>

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p. 55.

I think about how grateful I've been when someone kindly has told me that I've got lettuce stuck in my teeth. Or toilet paper trailing from my shoe. And those are simple courtesies. Early in ministry it was challenging to hear truth tellers say I needed to trust my voice and speak up more. One day, I hope I can be gracious when my children tell me other hard truths, like I need to stop driving. Or that I'm getting forgetful. It can be hard to hear the truth.

A doctor tells a patient it's time to stop smoking. A family member speaks up to ask mom or dad to stop drinking. A parent pulls another parent aside and says, "Your child has been bullying." None of these truths are easy to hear. We can't help but feel defensive when we hear such news. But that doesn't make the news untrue. Over time, the hard truth can become good news for us; it helps us get real, even though we initially experience it as hurtful or abrupt.

Hard as it is to hear, Jesus is right. Much of the time, I am *not* desperate for God. I am *not* on my knees with need or sorrow, or gratitude, or love. I don't need to be. I have plenty to eat. I live in a comfortable home. I have health insurance, and I have health. My children are safe. I have access to life in many of same ways many of you do, socially, intellectually, recreationally. I do not appear to be in dire need of *anything*.

Without dire need of anything, I, and I suspect we, can forget to talk with God or *think* about God. It's so easy for deep, divine things to become afterthoughts. It happens because - as Jesus puts it - we are already "full." We have filled space that God could fill with other things. Too much news from CNN, too many clothes in our closet, too many worries about our future. We have already "received our consolation." There are so many things that make life pleasant. Yet, how often are we aware that we would be lost, physically and spiritually, without the grace that sustains us? *Jesus says we are in dire need of something: to live out of God's love, God's unconditional, never-ending, costly love.*

Today Jesus gives us a hard word. He teaches us about the limitations of our privilege. It's a truth about the Christian life, something we can't grasp until God becomes our everything, our starting place and our ending place.

It is not comfortable to sit in the "woes" column. I learned something about this from author and preacher Frederick Buechner. He once wrote:

The world says, 'Mind your own business,' and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.' The world says, 'Follow the wisest course and be a success,' and Jesus says, 'Follow me and be crucified.' The world says, 'Drive carefully - the life you save may be your own' - and Jesus says, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' The world says, 'Law and order,' and Jesus says, 'Love.' The world says, 'Get' and Jesus says, 'Give.' In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks [he] they can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.<sup>4</sup>

Wow! Thank you, Frederick Buechner. Jesus' teaching in Luke is soul-rattling. Much of the Church universal and many of us will try to ignore it or domesticate it. But we do so at our peril. These Beatitudes are not bricks thrown at us. They are bread to feed us.<sup>5</sup> Because when all around our souls gives way, even hard truth, spoken in love, can be good news. Jesus is not meddlin'. He's telling us the truth. How plain is that. Wow! Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening To Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner*.

<sup>5</sup> Randy Alcorn (on Clergy Coaching Network, a meme)