

Blessed Are We...
by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
For Berkeley Chinese Community Church
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Luke 6:17–26

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 Man. ²³ Rejoice on 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.



Ever since I could remember, there's always been a world out there and a world in here <gesture to heart>. When I was really little...my whole world was home - I spoke Chinese – Toisan dialect; I ate rice and meat and vegetables for every single meal; I ate with chopsticks and rice from a bowl. When I started school and ventured out into the world out there -

I found out that not everyone spoke Toisan or ate the same kind of food as I did. Not everyone was expected to greet their elders with polite hellos as soon as you saw them. I thought I was alone.



I thought no one else led that kind of life. I was wrong!



Lots of folks experienced life that way - the world out there being different from the world at home. And it wasn't just my Chinese friends or my Asian friends or my ethnic friends! I found out that even my so-called all-American friends often experienced life in this way.

One in particular tells this story about her life: when she was growing up she thought she had perfectly normal parents. They were, after all, her parents and she thought that other families were just as peculiar as hers, but in different ways. As she ventured out into the world out there she realized that while her parents were "normal" in a great many ways they were also extremely eccentric.

And it was their eccentricities, not their normalcies, that made them wonderful parents. Her parents participated in protests and marches. Her parents did not serve grapes for most of her growing up life because they were in solidarity with the migrant grape workers in California's grape country and Cesar Chavez.



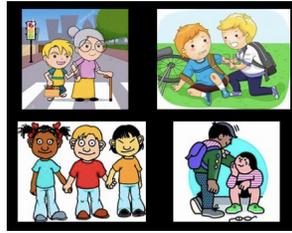
One night, when she was about five years old her parents and her brother and she were sitting around having a typical once-a-month special dinner - a picnic in the living room. Rugs were rolled up, furniture was moved, and the best part - the most memorable, most special part - was that the menu was take out food or junk food or food of the kids' choice!

So on this particular indoor picnic night they were sitting around eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and her parents started explaining what it means to be a Christian.

So picture yourself at five or six hearing your parents tell you that being a Christian isn't about believing in a creed or a statement of faith... it isn't about belonging to a particular group of people in a particular church in a particular denomination. NO! Being a Christian, your parents tell you, is that you are called to live in this world, but not be of this world.

"What?!?!?" She blurted out - "You mean I didn't have to memorize all those Bible verses for Sunday School?"

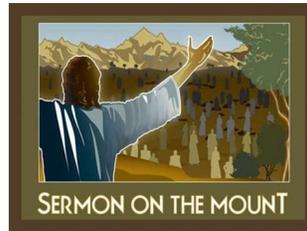
Her parents continued to tell her that if memorizing those verses helped you to actually follow them in everyday life...then memorizing them was a good thing! To her parents, being a Christian was not so much what you believed, but how you acted out that belief in the world.



This story to me is the heart of today's gospel reading. All those Blessed Are's - seen through God's eyes - conveyed by Jesus to his disciples. Statements made in a time when the world saw as blessed...those who have family, home, land, crops, offerings to the temple.



The world says you are blessed when you have "stuff" – stuff like prestige, power, a fine reputation! Not much different from today! Don't we often thank God for our many blessings.....what definition are we using? What are "Blessings"?



So, rewind - back two thousand years - Jesus comes along and says,
 - 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.
 And so on...

Someone once said - these words, known as the Beatitudes - serve as the "Constitution of Christ's Kingdom". These are pretty radical words - to be spoken in a society where the opposite was true.

No wonder Jesus was seen as a threat to those in power. No wonder he was seen as a subversive. Jesus was asking his disciples to see the world as God sees the world...to see beyond the world's values...

It's good to set the scene - we find that Jesus has been up on the mountain to pray. He selects his disciples and then comes down to be with the multitudes that have gathered. Luke is careful to state specific geographic regions that are represented: Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon. It is a clear message to us that whatever Jesus is prepared to teach is **for all people** - the Jews **and** the Gentiles.

The audience undoubtedly includes the sick, the troubled and other persons of special concerns. We are accustomed to Luke's Gospel by now...we have witnessed time and time again that Jesus' healing actions and his words are closely interrelated. We are reminded again and again that Jesus walks his talk!

Jesus probably doesn't know every one gathered to listen to him. But he **does** recognize their personal condition in life...he **does know this** – that they brought with them - their deep yearnings and expectations. Luke tells us that they have come hoping to be touched by Jesus - to receive just a little bit of his power so that they might be healed. They have come looking for a blessing. And so they wait for Jesus to speak. They wait in anticipation of being informed of the divine agenda.

Jesus speaks and begins with a short list of ways we can be blessed. A state of blessedness... joy... happiness...a happiness that is so complete that it cannot be contained...something that comes from deep inside of us and overflows so that the world has to sit up and take notice of our sense of elation...the Kingdom of God!

The thing is...Jesus doesn't include anything within his list that we would normally think of that would bring us such extreme joy. In fact, he completely contradicts the ideas and values of a materialistic, sensual society...a society that equates happiness with house, car, and bank account. It is our introduction to the topsy-turvy world Christ presents as an alternative to the status quo.

He speaks the blessings - four symmetrical comparisons of blessings and woes, and they are the opposite of what the crowd and we would anticipate. He says in essence...

- Blessed are the poor...but woe to the rich.
- Blessed are the hungry...but woe to those who are full.
- Blessed are the weeping...but woe to those that are laughing.
- Blessed are the rejected...but woe to those who are accepted.

As Jesus presents his thoughts to those gathered, it becomes apparent that he is not interested in keeping things the same. Rather, his purpose was to usher in a world that would literally be reversed...



an upside down kind of world and the people he is speaking to are NOT the downtrodden as the world sees them – they are the ones who are blessed! Those who have gathered – THEY are the ones who are blessed – - - already! They got their blessing – just not exactly the kind of blessing they had in mind.

This sermon is the inauguration manifesto of how the world looks now that God in Christ has taken matters in hand - in other words, these blessings and woes announce that God, in Jesus Christ, already sees the world in a strikingly different way than we do. The "real world," for all those who are in Christ, is one in which most of the major status roles in life are utterly reversed.

Funny thing - there is no contingency plan – nothing to let us know what we can do to earn these blessings and avoid the curses.

Sooo interesting...those curses and blessings were anchored in the present as well as the future. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is already the Kingdom of God" and "Woe to you that are rich, for you have already received your consolation". Both of these are realized...they are now!

They are firmly planted in the present and are not promises for the future. However, in the other blessings and woes, "now" is contrasted with "you shall," which clearly indicates future fulfillment. This joining of the present and the future reminds us that with Jesus, we are already beginning to experience the Kingdom of God here in our everyday lives and will ultimately have it fulfilled in the future.

But if we read a little further – a little beyond verse 26 – we hear suggestions that are also counter-intuitive...counter-what the world would suggest...he says things like

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,”

“bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse”

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;”

He says things “love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return”

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

And ‘Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

Just like the explanation of my friends’ parents – to be in the Kingdom of God – it’s more about how we live our faith – how we share our blessings...the present and the future – they are all intertwined...



From where I sit this means this kingdom of heaven, this kingdom of God, which Jesus talked about all the time, is here! At hand. Now. Wherever you are. In ways you’d never expect.

It means to me that we are all to be people who recognize our own blessedness, pass on these blessings to others, and by doing so – help to create the Kingdom of God – the **K**ingdom of God here on earth. No matter what our context – we are blessed and we can show it by how we recognize, respect and treat each other and the world around us...



One of my colleagues was inspired to ask his congregation to write modern day beatitudes – something that spells out in today’s context – Inspired by Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God...Here’s what they came up with:

- Blessed are those who live in pain because they can’t afford appropriate health care.
- Blessed are those who work two or three jobs but still don’t earn enough to pay the bills.
- Blessed are the parents who can’t afford to buy a birthday cake or present for their child.
- Blessed is the promising high school senior whose parents can’t afford college application fees.
- Blessed are those who live under bridges and in cars.
- Blessed are those who live in fear because of their or their loved one’s immigration status.
- Blessed are those who have disabilities that cannot be seen.

- Blessed are those who are struggling with a mental illness...
- Blessed are the poor for they will find peace. Blessed are we that we can be a part of it all!

The other day – I helped to bury a member of Sycamore Church – the family was there – the Japanese pastor was there – the tears were there – the sadness – the mourning. It was raining...at moments, it was pouring...and I felt Jesus' words come to life - 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. We were all teary – weeping...it seemed even the heavens were weeping!

And just as we were saying our final farewell and placing the flowers in the open grave, the rain stopped, the sun came out from behind the clouds, the smiles came! And then the laughter came...when one of Chieko's grandchildren quipped, "Isn't that just like Oba-chan to bring the sun out to warm us up so we won't catch a cold?" Blessed are those who are weeping for you will laugh...

And the modern day Blessings connected to this?

- Blessed are those who are not in good relations with their parents...
- Blessed are those who are struggling through divorce proceedings
- Blessed are those who face the sorrow of Alzheimer's,
- Blessed are those who cry in the shower so their abusers can't hear them.

Blessed are those who weep, for they will laugh, they will find peace. Blessed are we that we are a part of it all!

YES – even now today as we part ways...yes – even now today when we might be sad. We are to be this BCCC family who recognizes our blessedness not so much in spite of our present context, but **because** of our context. We have lived long enough to know that out of challenges come some pretty amazing beyond-our-imagination kind of experiences. We have lived long enough to know that life is yin AND yang – life is filled with challenges AND blessings – life in that way is full! How wonderful is our God to give us opportunities for experience both! Would we even recognize what the world calls blessings without what the world knows as challenges? How wise is our God to give us both! You see? Blessed are we....whatever is going on – whatever is happening – even when there are tears.



And we are called to pay it forward – to let the blessing shine through us that others can be blessed always...Blessed are we that we are a part of God's world now and forevermore. Amen.