

**“Taking Jesus Seriously: Blessings and Woes” based on Luke 6:17-28, Psalm 1, Jeremiah 17:5-8
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on February 16, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

I love it when we have a baptism as a part of our Sunday service. We are fortunate that this week, we welcome Winston into our church community and next week, we will welcome Nora – and each of them still just babies. Now, I made mention of this earlier in our liturgy, but I’ll repeat it: In our tradition we baptize infants and children as a way to demonstrate our belief that we do not earn salvation, but rather that God’s grace comes first through faith, before we can do anything to earn it. Therefore, we baptized him in the faith of his parents and the church community.

Later on in life, Winston will make a decision for themselves about their own faith, but in baptizing them now, we state our faith that the Holy Spirit has marked them as God’s own, because loves them for who they are now, even as dependent babies. Likewise, the Spirit is with them, but not as a reward. It’s God’s promise. Paul says the Holy Spirit is the downpayment of our inheritance, which is the abundant and eternal life of the Son of God, who entered our humanity, joining us to him. He unites our humanity with God now and forever.

Other traditions practice believer’s baptism when someone chooses to be baptized, and this practice is beautiful also. It has its own merits and its own theological significance. But again, we are emphasizing here the action of God through the faith of the church. There is no way Winston thinks he’s earned God’s love. He probably is just wondering why we splashed water on his forehead. His family and the church act in faith for him. In the water and this sacrament, we have a visible sign of God’s inward and active grace.

The job of his parents and the job for all of us in the church is to respond to God’s grace, which is in the good news of God sharing in our humanity in Jesus to live in our humanity, die for us, rise for us, and ascend for us. Our response should be like that of Simon Peter in last week’s gospel passage, where he responded to Jesus with confession by telling the truth of his sinfulness, and with surrender by bowing down at Jesus’s feet in total humility, and with prayer by addressing Jesus as Lord and following him. We too respond to grace by confession, surrender, and prayer.

In today’s gospel reading, we find Jesus in the center of a large crowd of people. It is a level place, or plain, from which he gives his sermon to his closest disciples first. From there, his words are overheard and spread out to all the people from the center. Like the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus begins with beatitudes or blessings to this crowd, and it likely would have been a comfort to the vast majority, as they lived under Rome and Jewish religious leaders.

After all, both Rome and the two groups leading the Jewish people claimed divine authority. The Romans said the gods favored them to rule the world because of their devotion and practices. They did their religion right and it led to victory in battle. This is why Christians would later find themselves persecuted by the Romans, especially after battlefield losses. This is because Christians, when they refused to worship the gods and the emperor, the Romans believed they threatened the stability of the empire. As such, Christians were often labeled as dangerous “atheists,” for not rightly worshipping the pagan gods.

In Judea, the Sadducees and Pharisees had local power. The Sadducees ran the temple believed that they were in power despite the Roman occupation. They said God was pleased with their sacrifices and kept them in power. Meanwhile, the Pharisees pointed to their piety and religious teachings. They saw their ascendancy to power as proof that if everyone did what they said, God would one day throw off their Roman oppressors. They put heavy burdens on the people as they missed the point of the law itself. Jesus often called them hypocrites.

Rome and the Judean leaders claimed they had a legitimate right to rule the people based on divine authority and intervention. In their religious structures, they claimed their gods or even the one true God approved. But as we read in Psalm 138 last week, their pride does not speak well for them, since the true God who is exalted draws near to the humble, or lowly, those like a child. Yet sees those who are exalted only from a distance. Worldly success is not necessarily a sign of God's providential approval, as it requires putting trust in humanity and its standards, considering our accomplishments in the flesh to be our strength, turning away from God. As Jeremiah and Psalm 1 point out, this is dry – without living water.

To set the scene, you should know that there were no bank accounts in the ancient world. Being rich or poor meant a status and the material benefits that came or were denied based on your status compared to others. So, when Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor,” he speaks to those without status. The word ‘poor’ in Koine Greek, *ptochoi*, means those who ‘crouch like beggars.’ In Hebrew, the word ‘ani’ often translated as poor, means ‘afflicted.’ These are humble people who depend on the material abundance of the wealthy and high status around them to come down through labor, contracts, loans, and patronage, or even begging for alms. Most of the people in Jesus's time – the vast majority – lived in extreme poverty, struggling to eat, and dying young.

In Greek, the word we translate as rich is *plousios*, which means ‘to have an abundance.’ This abundance is the material benefits from family heritage, social and political connections. Many of the Sadducees and Pharisees were chosen based on these connections. The Sadducees had a hereditary class, and Pharisees picked their students usually from among those who had the means to support a teacher. Rome was very hierarchical with a small patrician class of top dogs who provided the government and military leaders. A lower class of citizens called plebians were the merchants. They stood over the freedmen, non-citizens, and slaves.

The band of Jesus's closest disciples, whom Luke says Jesus called ‘apostles’ or ‘sent ones,’ were chosen mostly from among disconnected classes, especially fishermen. Certainly 4, and likely 7, of the 12 apostles did what higher classes didn't want to do – they put their life at risk going out on the sea, a symbol of chaos, to bring in food. Only one, Matthew the tax collector, may have had material wealth, but he had no status among the Judeans, as he was a traitor working for Rome, and regardless, he gave it up when he followed Jesus. Another was a zealot, ready to overthrow Rome in war, who likely lived in hiding before following Jesus. Beyond that, no occupations are clear. Jesus worked closest with people from the margins and not in the centers of power.

Likewise, what we know from all the gospels, is that only a handful of Pharisees seemed to like Jesus. A scribe here or there, one rich young ruler who liked him initially, but walked away dejected, and a centurion. There is no mention of a Sadducee follower, except maybe John the Baptist, who, rather than follow his father into the priesthood at the temple, was called to go out into the wilderness to prepare the way for Jesus.

All of this is to say why we can expect that Jesus's words were a comfort to most of around him who were low status, often hungry, often mourning early deaths, and struggling in the world. He addresses the disciples, and with them, a great multitude of Judeans, including those from Jerusalem, and others from Tyre and Sidon, two pagan cities. They came to be healed, and some were freed from unclean spirits. The people wanted to touch Jesus, and to hear him preach. And so, he starts off, “Blessed are the lowly beggars.”

In Greek, the word we translate here as ‘blessed’ is *makarios* and literally means ‘made large.’ It is an increase in status with God that brings the benefit of being closer to God. ‘Blessed’ in Hebrew,

as heard in Psalm 1, is *'ashre'* which means 'advance.' In this way, blessing is advancing on the right path to God and the benefits that come with that.

The Psalmist says "blessed" is the one who does not seek the advice of the wicked, and does not stand in the path of the sinful, nor sit in the company of scoffers, or the people who are mockers of others. The blessed one instead delights in the instruction, or Torah, or Law of the Lord. Jesus matches this by saying the poor, or lowly beggar, is "blessed," along with the hungry, the weeping, and the ones who are excluded, insulted, and called evil on account of following him. They are blessed. He says the prophets who spoke for God were also treated like these blessed ones are treated right now. Therefore, he invites them to leap for joy for their reward is great.

Jesus then turns to say "woe." It sounds like "woah" as we use it. It is a word of warning from the Hebrew, "oi" as in "oi vey." It is a word of warning to those who have an abundance, those who are satisfied with enough food, those who are laughing now, and those who have the high regard of others with power in this world. He says they have already received their comfort, and will be hungry, and they will mourn, because they are like the false prophets – the ones who claimed to speak for God, but did not. He warns that success in this life, by worldly standards does NOT mean someone is blessed by God.

This is hard for us in our world today, as we are made to think blessings are material. Think of the online #blessed. We are told that those who are successful must have done something right to be rewarded and blessed by God. Those who are suffering or poor or downtrodden must be so because of some failure of their own.

Jesus says "no." Instead, it is the lowly beggars, the hungry, the grieving, and the excluded, who can trust that God draws near to them, and they are moving to God. These are the ones with their roots planted in streams of water, who bear fruit in proper season, with green leaves. They will not wither in the heat they will not wither, because as Jeremiah says, because their works will prosper, even if they do not see it right away.

The Psalmist says the wicked are like chaff, to be blown away by the wind, and they will not rise in the judgement of God, nor among those who practice justice. This is because the Lord knows the path of the just, for the path of the wicked will be destroyed. This is God's promise. But for Jesus, this listing of blessings and woes has an admonition against self-righteousness. Those who are blessed, or drawn near to God, must love their enemies. They must bless those who curse, or speak against them, and pray for those who slander, mistreat, and or spitefully use them.

This is a challenge, because in our worldly concerns, we may be led astray to think this is "naïve." We are told you have to fight fire with fire. We think that if we don't match the tactics of the world, it will allow injustice to remain strong. Yet Christ says to resist evil with love. He undermines a false view of blessing, saying it is our fruit that will prosper. This means we should not ascribe special significance to worldly success, nor should we shun those who disagree with us, who hate us even, because only love can break the everlasting cycle of evil.

This does not mean we accept abuse or harm done to us. It is right to get away, but we do need to reject hating that person in return. As hard as that can be, when we do not forgive it only gives the person who hurt us an ongoing control over us. Forgiveness frees the hurt one from the pain caused by harboring hate. Forgiveness convicts the one who did the harm, because you cannot be forgiven for something you did not do. Forgiveness allows the victim to move on.

Also, Jesus's words challenge us another way, because when I look at our congregation and in the mirror many of us have status right now. Most us do not lack for food. We do not mourn oppression

or frequent early deaths in our lives. Many of us have good reputations. People speak well of us and Jesus says “woe” or “woah.” The ‘woes’ are a warning to remember that these can pull us away from God and we pull ourselves away from God letting a cloud come in to cloud our vision of God. This happens when we make success in this world more important than our relationships and most of all, our relationship with God. We separate from God who loves us and always pursues us. But if we confess, surrender, and pray, we find ourselves remembering that God is always pursuing us with love and forgiveness. We can always turn back into God’s arms.

We live in a culture that tells us we can be or do whatever we wish. It is up to us. But I ask that we must remember that God’s love isn’t based on our accomplishments. God loves us first and we respond. This response comes by sharing from our abundance, feeding the hungry, and comforting the mourning, all in the confidence that we are loved first.

We must walk the path of confession, telling the truth of our sins, surrendering in humility to depend on others and be dependable, while we pray without ceasing – always talking to God, building a relationship with God, through our words and our actions.

Our identity, nor our status before God, is not found in our successes, be it through heroic action or our inner genius. No, instead, our identity is in Christ, who draws near to us, calling us ‘blessed,’ When we confess, surrender and pray, we are responding to God’s action here and now. Beloved, when we are rooted in the living water of Jesus, God’s Word, then this is revealed not by our wealth or status, but by our fruits. Remember Paul’s list: love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and our self-control. This is where God is visible.

This is why confessing the gospel of Jesus being fully God and fully divine is so important. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who entered our humanity to live in our limits, and rather than achieving worldly success by exploiting his status as God. Rather than slaughtering enemies or seeking wealth, Jesus humbly went to the cross, died for us, and rose for us. What’s more he ascended for us, prays for us, and his Spirit is in us. He is still active in this world around us, in us, and among us.

Let us have eyes to see this, confidence to know we are loved, and the courage to confess, surrender and pray. For if we believe gospel of God’s love in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, then we must take Jesus seriously and find that God is already at work in the poor, in the hungry, and in those excluded because they seek the justice of Christ. If we believe gospel of Jesus’s life, death, resurrection and ascension, we must take his warnings seriously about our own abundance. We must set aside the belief that material goods are God’s blessing, so that we can see blessing in the ministry of God, which is the Spirit with us in life’s challenges, trusting that we are loved first.

Likewise, we are called to be ministers, and to accept ministry – which is loving service. Therefore, we must be humble enough to accept the help of others, and to help others, not because they’ve earned it, but because God loves them. God in our flesh humbly died for us, so let us take Jesus’s words seriously, finding strength in our weakness to love as God loves us, even loving our enemies, and praying for them, as we stand confidently in the love of God. Amen.