

A Level Plain Perspective on Blessings

Luke 6:17-26

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

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the reign of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you,
revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Humanity.*

*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.*

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

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.

*Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors
did to the false prophets."*

This reading of Luke's Sermon on the Plain happens to fall around Valentine's Day every three years in the lectionary cycle. If you glance at social media during this time, you may notice a surge in posts about feeling loved or sometimes a simple photo of a couple with the description "#blessed." Now, in case you don't know, a hashtag is a word or a phrase that is preceded by a pound sign or a hash sign [#], and it's used on social media to categorize or identify similar messages on a specific topic or theme. A type of metadata, hashtags allow anyone to tag content on sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

A friend of mine searched for "#blessed," which is widely used on social media to express gratitude for fortunate circumstances. Here are some more memorable ones:

...Turns out my cats snuggle all day while I am at work. #blessed

...Finally replaced my old iPhone with a new one. #blessed

...Found the perfect parking spot. #blessed

...My favorite ice cream is on sale. #blessed

You get the idea. Expressing blessedness is clearly a popular sentiment. Instagram alone has more than 138 million *blessed* hashtags. In NYT article, Linguist Deborah Tannen was quoted saying that “*blessed* is used now where in the past one might have said *lucky*.” (1)

What I did not realize was amount of controversy this word with the hashtag brings these days. Critics claim that it borders on self-gratuitous expression and a little humblebragging. I came across a *New York Times* article in which the author quips, “There’s nothing quite like invoking holiness as a way to brag about your life. But calling something ‘blessed’ has become the go-to term for those who want to boast about an accomplishment while pretending to be humble, fish for a compliment, acknowledge a success without sounding too conceited, or purposely elicit envy.” (2)

Others critique the word’s overuse for trite things which lessen its meaning. As one person put it that someone might say - “Now, it’s just like strawberries are half price at Trader Joe’s. I feel so blessed.” The term is overused and we need to rethink its meaning.

Turns out, Jesus has something to say about *blessed* as we heard in today’s scripture from Luke 6. Both Matthew and Luke wrote about Jesus’ blessing sermon. We don’t know if there was more than one occasion when Jesus preached on blessings or if the two writers had different takes or even wanted to offer a correction of the other one. We commonly refer to them as the Beatitudes. There are nine in Matthew and only four in Luke, and each blessing in Luke has a corresponding woe.

Luke’s sermon is given on a level place, not on a mountain like in Matthew – known as Sermon on the Mount. In Luke, Jesus is with the people who came as far as Jerusalem and Judea to the south and Tyre and Sidon to the north. Luke’s broad geographical audience is intentional - this gospel is for all. What’s more, Luke addresses his audience directly. “All except the last of Matthew’s blessings are general statements in the third person - for example, ‘Blessed are *those* who mourn, for *they* will be comforted’ (Matt. 6:4), whereas Luke’s are in the second person, directed to his immediate audience - “you will be filled,” “you will laugh.” (6:21) (3)

The fact that both the blessings and the woes in Luke are in the second person suggests that the audience described as present for the sermon included both some people who benefited from the status quo ...and those who suffered from it. They are all there together: poor/rich, hungry/full, weeping/laughing, rejected/accepted, hearing the blessing and the hope; hearing the woes and warnings.

And, I must admit Luke’s Beatitudes can be difficult to hear for those with like me with privilege. Matthew’s version may be more palatable: “poor in Spirit” is preferable to the blessing going to the real poor, or the ones who are literally hungry, grief-stricken and outcast. But Luke makes it clear throughout his gospel. He is all about making the comfortable uncomfortable. In Luke, God is about a world turned upside down, from the poor lifted up and

the mighty cast down in Mary's Magnificat in chapter 1 to the captives released and good news preached to the poor in Jesus' sermon in chapter 4. There is an intentionality in Luke to name the poor as those who inherit, embody, and illustrate the reign of God.

It's true that throughout Luke, Jesus seems clear that wealth and privilege are real dangers that have the power to separate one from God, from the human community, from living an authentic life. Jesus is direct; if you are living the expense of others, beware.

When we say *blessed*, we typically refer to circumstantial happiness or fortune. We equate it with the good life, whatever that would be for us: a loving partner, a successful career, an excellent education, resilient children, a good retirement, good health, trusted friends, financial security, housing. But does having these things then make you blessed?

When Jesus uses the word *blessed* in Luke, it's the Greek word *makarios*. One scholar argues that the makarisms and woes set out the parameters of honor and shame within which Jesus' public teachings flow. Instead of "blessed" or "happy," he offers a different translation - "How honorable!" (4) "How honorable are the poor, for you will be filled... how honorable are those who weep, for you will laugh..." These are realities. "And shame to you who are full now and take it for granted and take from others"

So these blessings, these statements of "Blessed are" or "How honorable are" are not aspirational goals. As Sharon Ringe says in her commentary: "In each case, the blessing makes a statement of fact: one is blessed because of a future that is a sure part of God's reign. There is no note of threat or challenge in these blessings. Nowhere do they say, 'Do this in order to guarantee a specific result.'" (5)

In other words, these beatitudes are not meant for us to achieve - they are a simple statement of how things are in the reign of God. They are an announcement of the Divine intention. They signal to both the rich and the well fed and the laughing and the insiders that in order to participate in God's new kin-dom, we need to align our lives and priorities of shalom, the Beloved Community, the Reign of God. So all will be fed, all will rejoice, all will be made right.

Jesus' Sermon on the Plain means - leveling the playing field, lifting the lowly, challenging the greedy. Comforting the afflicted, afflicting the comfortable. This theme is not new in Luke - the thread runs throughout the Bible. Our welfare is bound up in the welfare of others.

The kin-dom of God teaches us that we are all connected. We are not isolated individuals making posts about how great our life is on social media without concern of how our lives affect others. We are not separated from one another with what we classify as fortune or its opposite. We are, all of us, from Jerusalem and Judea, from all parts of the world gathered with Christ on a plain level listening to a new way of thinking that honors those discarded, that

lifts up weakness as power and forgiveness as strength. In Celtic Christian wisdom, we continue to see this oneness of connection.

We're all there in our different social conditions and circumstances: rich and poor, hungry and fed, mourning and laughing, insiders and outsiders. We're all there knowing that life is fragile and that these situations could change at any moment. Whether we recognize that patterns of privilege, systemic racism and structural inequities impact humans' ability to flourish, or whether we blithely ascribe advantages to luck and disadvantages to lack of effort, we're all there. We're all gathered on the plain with Jesus, receiving blessings and hope or listening to woes and warnings to pay attention to God's kin-dom that transforms life as we know it.

Are we willing to be open to a different and deeper understanding of blessing? Are we willing to hear Luke's version that involves different verb tenses - present tense, future tense, and the subjunctive, conditional mood? Together, they point to a complex reality that one might not want to wrap up into a simple message. The message is "Now and not yet."

There is a present and a future and a conditional element to it all, the rich complexity of which is lost if one emphasizes only one and not the others. If we only emphasize the present, we will have to "spiritualize" the blessings and woes because poverty, hunger, and oppression really do exist. If we only emphasize the future, our faith and spirituality can be too meek, suggesting we accept present injustice. What the subjunctive mood adds to this is that there is interplay between what is and what ought to be. We are called into action. The complexity includes both the material and the spiritual, speaking of real poverty and hunger, as well as spiritual poverty and hunger. The text invites us to respond and not be passive. (6)

Let's stay here a bit longer on the level plain. Let's be aware if we are looking down on people. Instead let us choose to see them, blessed as the Holy One blesses them, each one as beloved.

Close with an excerpt from "Modern Beatitudes" by Rev. Anna Blaedel (7)

blessed are you who are raging.
blessed are you who are mourning.
blessed are you who feel numb.
blessed are you who feel sick. and tired. and sick and tired.
blessed are you who refuse to turn away.
blessed are you who need to turn away.
blessed are you who keep breathing deep.
blessed are you who are tending to your own needs.
blessed are you who are tending to the needs of another.
...
blessed are you who feel broken open beyond repair.
blessed are you who are raw beyond words.

....

blessed are you who are marching.

blessed are you who are weeping.

...

blessed are you who know deep in your bones that you are good. and beautiful.
and beloved. and sacred. and worthy. and believed. and held. and capable of healing
beyond your wildest imagination.

blessed are you who remind others they are good. and beautiful. and beloved. and sacred.
and worthy. and believed. and held. and capable of healing beyond their
wildest imagination.

blessed are we when we dare to dream of a world without sexual violence,
without white supremacy, without misogyny, without police brutality,
without anti-trans and anti-queer violence.

...

blessed are we when we dare to imagine repair, and transformation.

blessed are we when we labor together to make it so.

May it be so. Amen.

1) Jessica Bennett, "They Feel 'Blessed,' The New York Times, 5/2/14

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/blessed-becomes-popular-word-hashtag-social-media.html>

2) Bennett

3) The Rev. Dr. Robyn Michalove, "#blessed," Day1.org 2/13/22

<https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/61f7f24f6615fbe97c00003d/robyn-michalove-blessed>

4) Mark Davis, "Reality and Ideality," 2/6/22

<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2019/02/reality-and-ideality.html#comment-form>

5) Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke: Westminster Bible Companion*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995,
pages 92-95.

6) Davis

7) Rev. Anna Blaedel, "Modern Beatitudes," *Enfleshed*

<https://enfleshed.com/liturgy/modern-beatitudes/>