

6 Epiphany
Luke 6:17-26
February 17th, 2019
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Jesus came down with the twelve apostles 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 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.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 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."

It was 1979. I was working on my undergraduate degree in international journalism at the University of Washington. I had a particular interest in Soviet media and so I was thrilled one morning when Professor Edelstein introduced a guest lecturer – a journalist from the Soviet Union. His country was in the middle of an economic, political and social disaster that came to be called “the Era of Stagnation.”

As an aspiring journalist, what I wanted to hear about were two state-run newspapers: one was the propaganda vehicle of the Communist Party called *Pravda*, which means “truth,” and the other was the mouthpiece of the Soviet government called *Izvestia*, which means “news.” Sarcastic citizens of the former Soviet Union claimed that “there is no news in Truth and there is no truth in News.” Writers conveyed uncensored political and religious material by underground media called *samizdat*, “self-published,” often at great risk.

So you can imagine my surprise when the first words out of this guest lecturer’s mouth were, “You should know that people in my country feel sorry for you.” Completely the opposite of what I expected to hear. “In my country,” he went on, “if we see a line outside a store, we get in it. We don’t have to know what’s at the end of the line, we only know that we probably need it. It might be a few potatoes or a roll of toilet paper, but we are grateful for whatever it is.”

“We feel sorry for you,” he went on, “because you live in a world where satisfaction is always just out of reach. If you buy a new car, you are *almost* happy, but you don’t have a second car. If you go out and buy a second car, well, that’s nice but you don’t have a boat. If you buy a boat, you don’t have a vacation home on a lake.”

Setting politics aside, his point has always stuck with me. In this country and others, and now even in some former Soviet countries, we live in a materialistic society. Advertising and social media try to persuade us that happiness and love are available at a price if we are willing to buy more than we want or need. Technology offers almost immediate fulfilment of our every whim and promises to keep us endlessly entertained, safe and contented. We can even buy companion robots for our elderly or shut-ins to keep them from feeling isolated and lonely.

Now, let me be clear: Money and material things are not bad; greed is a problem. Scientific advances can be life-affirming or deadly. Social media can help maintain and support human activities for good or evil. Entertainment can be enjoyable, instructive or challenging or it can distract us from tending to our relationships or lull us into inaction. By themselves, none of these material things can be trusted to generate happiness, let alone bliss.

Bliss is deeper than any emotional state of happiness. Like compassion, liberty, wisdom and justice, happiness is a universal value. Every human desires happiness and notions of happiness are as diverse as human life itself. And the root of true happiness – bliss – lies in the discovery of what it is to exist as a human creation of God; a discovery that is made possible in communities that practice compassion, liberty, wisdom and justice. And bliss.

That requires groups of people in right relationship with each other and in right relationship with the Creator of the material world. These are people who know, experience and can share the joy of God’s creative energy as it realizes itself through them. People who know how to be grateful for simple graces like turnips and onions, for shelter from the snow, for friends who genuinely care about what happens to them.

Luke’s Jesus hand-picked a group of people from among his followers to teach them how to embody God’s bliss in community. Jesus was one teacher among many who remembered God’s promise to the Israelites. Some teachers were promoting violent revolution, while others thought that supporting Herod and the powers of Empire would be best. Still others proposed that the people withdraw to the desert while still others were sure that stricter adherence to the rules was the key. These are all conventional,

established approaches to managing human affairs. People curious about which of these paths to follow were in the crowd of Jews and Gentiles following Jesus around Galilee.

In the passage just before our reading, Jesus has come down from the mountaintop where he has been praying all night to attune his consciousness to the consciousness of God. He has chosen 12 people to be eyewitnesses at the core of God's renewal of Israel. Jesus and the 12 have come back to the crowd at a level place.

And here, Jesus speaks to all those who trust him. He lays out his vision for how he intends for this emerging community to interact with each other. He lays out four blessings and four woes motivated by his awareness of a gap, a discrepancy, between God's vision for human life and the ways that people are actually living.

The first blessing sets the foundation: "How honorable, how *blissful* are the poor, for yours is the kingdom..." This blessing is more about justice than it is about money. At least five of the apostles are nowhere near destitute financially: four own boats and one is a tax collector. By asking people to leave their families, Jesus may be making their financial situation worse. Of far greater concern to Jesus, is how the rich treat the poor.

The initial blessing is in the present tense: "for yours *is* the kingdom." Whether they are currently socially and financially poor or rich, they are in the presence of the kingdom now. And because this is the in-breaking realm of God's heaven, it can continue to emerge as it replaces hunger, mourning, weeping and persecution.

Consequently, this is the only one of the eight that does not foretell a reversal.

In what follows, Jesus presents a series of circumstances, *injustices*, that God will make right as only God can whether people join the process or not. As God's realm unfolds, those who have been hungry will be filled with God's bliss and a sense that their life of simplicity, poverty and even hardship are taking on greater meaning in the larger context of God's justice.

Those who weep now will laugh. Jesus is not saying that we are wrong to be upset. And he is certainly not implying that there is anything desirable or virtuous in being poverty-stricken, hungry or sad. The promise is that, at some point, we will look back on our lives to discover with joy that God was closest to us when we were broken and despondent.

Next, Luke's Jesus shifts our attention to the reaction of this unjust world to the world of God's justice and mercy still coming. Not only will the

present world decline the invitation to participate in God's righting of injustices, it will actively exclude, ridicule and condemn those who *do* choose to take part. Yet, even in the face of the fiercest rejection, Jesus urges his followers to rejoice and leap for joy.

The reward in heaven is not held in escrow until after we die. Heaven is coming here and, as pressure on God's followers grows, communion with God strengthens. The reward grows here!

God's justice and mercy have always provoked opposition from those who like things just as they are, especially if injustice is serving to maintain their lifestyles and self-centered preferences. The four woes follow similar theological reasoning.

The rich have received the consolations of this world, and these will not last into the fullness of the next, although there is no indication of eternal damnation in God's working out of justice and mercy. Those addicted to conspicuous consumption will learn how to hunger and be grateful for what they have. Those who laugh at injustice now will learn to protest and to weep at the sight of it, even as it fades away.

And if any of the disciples of Christ find ways to rationalize present injustices and give the privileged reasons not to turn to Christ, they earn the sorrow and woe of a false prophet.

The sermon on the plain still runs counter to expectations. Jesus reverses assumptions about what brings about happiness even more radically than one Soviet journalist turned mine upside down. Jesus not only raises questions about the nature of happiness, he challenges us to define the core of our existence, to make choices and act consciously on our ultimate values.

Some choices harmonize us with God's bliss. Some choices unite us with misery. True happiness is not out of reach.

Choose love and be blessed. We are part of the gospel in ways we never dreamed of.

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