

Luke 6:17-25
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“Blessing and Woes”

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At the memorial service for my Grandfather, Gus Utke, my dad shared a story about him which I had never heard before. Grandpa had served as director of the Wisconsin Humane Society and Dad told of the time they visited a horse riding stable just outside of Milwaukee. It was one they had both gone riding at many times. Just as they arrived a woman came in crying, “Posie, bucked me off,” she said through her tears.

Gus looked at my Dad and whispered, “I’ve known Posie since she came to this stable, Posie has never bucked anyone off.” Grandpa went over to Posie, undid the girth belt and lifted the saddle off the horse and sure enough there were horrible saddle sores. An indication that the Stable was not taking proper care of Posie. As Grandpa walked in to talk to the stable manager, he noticed other horses lying down, many were skinny and sickly looking.

The two men had a long talk. The manager told Gus he simply did not have enough money to take proper care of the horses. Still, Grandpa being so worried about the horses he took the stable manager to court to get a judge’s decision to close the stable. The judge closed the stable and asked where the horses should go and Grandpa answered that he would take them to Joy Farms, a top-notch horse stable, which would nurse and care for them.

Following the decision to close the stable; the judge pronounced the sentence... this stable manager would have to pay \$65 dollars or serve time in jail. That would be about a \$600 dollar fine today. The manager replied to the judge that he had no money.

So, Grandpa paid the fine and went over to talk to the manger. The manager thanked him and said, “But Gus I still have no job.” A few days later Grandpa took the man over to Joy Farms, got him a job working with the horses and there he got to see the progress of his horses in a friendly, safe, well run stable.

Having gone up the mountain to call and name his disciples, Jesus now comes down the slope. On that level patch of land, he begins to preach. There he offers a message intended to turn the world upside down. The beatitudes, a word that comes from a Latin word meaning “blessed, truly happy, deeply fulfilled.”

In his sermon Jesus announces who is blessed, and it isn’t the usual suspects; “Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are you who weep, blessed are you when people hate or exclude or revile, or defame you on account of your love for me.” These words from Jesus would have sounded so strange they might as well have been spoken in a foreign language. Some would have wondered if he was joking.

That day there were people in the crowd who would have heard these blessings as a challenge to thousands of years of beliefs they held about God. Beliefs handed down by their

ancestors. There was a strain of Jewish belief which stated that wealth, health and power were all signs that God loved you. That you were in God's favor. Unfortunately, we don't have to look far to see this ancient system still in place today. We call it the prosperity gospel. And those who abide by it become convinced that sickness, suffering, and poverty are signs that you have fallen out of favor with God. So in these few lines in his sermon, Jesus is overturning generations of assumptions held by many about who God is and how God works.

When we consider how deeply the prosperity gospel was rooted, we discover why the crowd was shocked because they did hear him correctly, and Jesus knew his words would turn the world upside down, if anyone would listen.

And if we are listening, his words COULD have the same effect today. But for the most part many of us worship at the altars of power, money, control, and instant gratification. Society still operates on the beliefs that Men are more valued than women. The wealthy are more important than the poor. The satisfied are more important than the hungry. And those who can put on a happy face are more important than those who show sorrow. We too often accept that those who can take care of themselves are more faithful than those who need help. And these people Jesus calls Blessed, are these very ones society still treats as objects of mission, and charity.

Then there are Jesus' woes, which by that time in his sermon nobody is laughing. I like the way Father Michael Renninger describes these, "Woe to you if a full belly and a full bank account have highest priority in your life. Woe to you if you have worked tirelessly to avoid the pain, the need, the injustice which afflicts your neighbor." In other words, it isn't so much about having food, or water, or wealth that is wrong, Jesus says it is more about giving these things an ultimate and eternal place in our life. When they become our primary goal we are lost from Christ's way.

Then Father Renninger describes the Blessings, which I also appreciate, "But Blessed... blessed are you who embrace the poverty of Christ—the poverty which allowed him to pour out everything for those he loved. Blessed are you when you know the deep hunger of your own heart—the hunger for God—a hunger which leads you to feed your hungry neighbor. Blessed are you when people hate you because of WHAT you stand for and WHO you stand with. Blessed are you when people know that you're a Christian by the consistency of your words and deeds. Blessed—blessed are you because you stood up for truth, and that standing up for truth cost you something... and Blessed are you when you weep—weep over the suffering of a friend; weep over the violence between people or nations—weep over the lack of welcome refugees.

The beatitudes are a blessing because they challenge the widely accepted assumption that what truly counts is creating our own independence. We are ambushed with the idea that the good life comes when we are self-made, self-sufficient, and have our future self-secured. Instead Jesus' sermon is a declaration of Inter-dependence. An official proclamation that we

need each other, and we need God if we are to really know anything resembling true and blessed happiness.

In our Faith story today, geography becomes theology. Jesus' sermon on the plain symbolizes the level ground he is seeking for his words to create. Jesus is saying every single one of us is a have, and a have not. He is calling us to bridge the chasms we have created between hungry and full, happy and sad, rich and poor, outcast and in-group.

Jesus doesn't want anyone to get bucked off. Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah put it this way, "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low, the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

Amen.