

“God works in surprising ways – blessings and woes”

Luke 6:17-26 (February 13, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

As the premier of Saskatchewan announced changes to Public Health measures this week, he called on the citizens of our province to come together. He acknowledged that we are a *divided* people – an analysis that was backed up by a survey published just a few days later. That survey points to increasing polarization.

Eight out of ten people in our province think we are more divided than ever. We’re split over all kinds of things: How to handle Covid. How to deal with climate change. What to do with oil and gas. How to manage diversity.

And it’s not just here, in Saskatchewan. The whole country is grappling with protests and blockades as divisions intensify. Families have been split because of differences. People have stopped talking to each another. Relationships have become strained.

It would be possible for us to hear today’s Gospel reading as deepening those divisions. But that is not what Jesus intended. His Kingdom is an inclusive one, where divisions are healed and opponents discover reconciliation.



In this season of Epiphany we’ve been exploring the surprising work of God. It began when Jesus turned water into wine. Last week we saw an empty boat filled with a miraculous catch of fish.



In today’s passage, we hear the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. Have you heard of it? It’s related to a better-known section of the Gospel of Matthew – The Sermon on the Mount. But here, Jesus isn’t teaching on a mountain. He comes down from the mountain where he’s been praying, to teach on level ground. This detail may be important, and we’ll come back to it later.

There are some other differences as well. The sermon in Luke’s Gospel is shorter. There are only four beatitudes in our passage, in comparison with Matthew’s nine. And they’re simpler, more down-to-earth. It’s not “blessed are the poor *in Spirit*,” but simply “blessed are the *poor*” – full stop. For each blessing there is also a corresponding pronouncement of woe. And notice that all of these are spoken in the second person. It’s “blessed are *you* who are poor,” speaking *directly* to those present. That makes these saying more pointed. They’re aimed directly at us.



So that’s an overview of our passage. Now is the time to unveil the big surprise. Are you ready for it? You won’t be expecting this! *Who* does Jesus call blessed? You who are poor, hungry, weeping,

hated and excluded. And who does Jesus call woeful? You who are rich, full, laughing, and spoken well of.

There, aren't you surprised? It's exactly the opposite of what *I* would have said. "Lord, that can't be right! Surely you must be mistaken. You've got it reversed! It's the *rich* who are blessed, and the *poor* who are full of woe. Isn't that more the way things are? Not to worry, Jesus, I get mixed up sometimes too.

But Jesus looks us right in the eye. He says, "No, *I'm* not mixed up. It's *you* and the world you live in. And the way it orders itself, with rich at the top and poor at the bottom. And the unhealthy view you have of each other. This is not the Kingdom I desire. It's not the world as *I* want it to be." All right. So what do we do with that?



Let's start by unpacking the word "Blessed." What do you think it means? You might say "fortunate, happy, gifted." You've been *blessed* with a good marriage, *gifted* with good health, *happy* to have found a nice place to live. And it's right to be thankful for those things.

But the biblical word, *makarioi*, also has to do with *respect* and admiration. As in "blessed be the Lord," not because of God's good fortune, but rather because God is worthy of respect. "Blessed are you who are poor," because you are *exalted* in the eyes of God. You are not to be dismissed or diminished.

Jesus speaks to those, not at the *top* of society, but to those at the bottom. Those we often neglect or look down upon. But *God* does not look down on any of us. The danger for those who are down and out is to think that no one cares. That their lives don't matter. That they've been abandoned.



"Down and out" by Jelly Dude, used with permission.

Maybe you've felt that way at one time or another. Have there been lean times in your life? I think many of us have some experience of that. When it happens, says Jesus, when you find yourself without resources ... When you're *hungry* for that which you do not have... When you *weep* for sorrow, and suffer great loss... When you find yourself on the *outside* looking in, and when your *reputation* is damaged ... That's when you need to know that God is with you. And that even if you have *no respect* in the eyes of the world, you do in the eyes of God. You are blessed!



If there's danger when we're *down*, there is *another* danger when we think we have it made. And the danger *here* is perhaps an even greater one.



When we're at the *top* of the world and have all the things we need, when we're rich, and full, and laughing, and everyone speaks well of us ... when we have a polished reputation ... well, "be careful!" says Jesus. Because when you are surrounded by all these trappings of prosperity and signs of success ... what need have you for God?

Surely the temptation is to congratulate yourself for a job well done. Isn't it wonderful that you're so smart, that you worked so hard, that you've accomplished so much? (Notice how many times the word "you" came into that sentence!) When things are going well – and they do for all of us at one time or another – it's easy to *forget* where these blessings have come from. Easy to think we've done it all *ourselves*. That we can dispense with God and those old "superstitious ideas."

"Woe to you!" says Jesus. And it *shocks* us to hear it. "Woe to you who are rich," because at the very moment you consider yourself most favoured, most deserving, most entitled – that may be the moment you're farthest away from God.

When Jesus says "Woe" he's really putting up a *warning sign*. He's telling us to watch out! The road ahead may be rougher than we think, and the future not as certain as we suppose. Watch out for bumps. There is a danger of subsidence ahead. You may go off the road altogether. Take note! Be careful!



Someone asked this week if preachers sometimes soften things to avoid making people feel uncomfortable. In other words, would I be preaching on the blessings but avoid these words of woe? Preachers may sometimes do that. But Jesus certainly didn't.

Yet, even his words of *woe* are a powerful expression of God's *love and concern* for each one of us. Jesus wants to redirect us. He wants to shift us back to a better path. A way that leads to blessing and not disaster.



He's inviting us to *see* the world in a different way. To view it through different eyes. To apply a different set of values. So now the "great ones" of our world, those who wield power and influence, those we look up to and try to emulate: The stars and heroes, the social influencers, the folks who experience great fortune, the top one percent financially ...

Well, *maybe* they're blessed, *sort of*. But in *Kingdom terms* they may be all messed up! Maybe their relationships are broken and tattered. Maybe they're over consumption is killing them. Maybe they're living for the moment but neglecting the long-term consequences of their actions.



Later in the Gospel of Luke we'll hear about a rich man dressed in the finest clothes and living in the lap of luxury. He never set his eyes on his poor neighbour, Lazarus, who seemed to be invisible, even though he sat at rich man's gate.

Blessed are you who are poor, says Jesus. You may be nothing in the eyes of the world, but you're *not* nothing to me. And if we have eyes to see *as Jesus sees* ... the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are reviled – our eyes will see them too. Our hearts will go out to them, our prayers will embrace them, our hands will lift them up.

Lift them *up*, because in God's realm (the *new* world order, established by Jesus) they have a place of honour. They're not forgotten. You are not forgotten, if you happen to be there.

When we make blankets, when we sponsor refugees, when we sit down with First Nations people to hear their stories ... When we pray for our neighbours, when we notice other's grief or loneliness, when we enter their space to establish friendship and community, all of us are enriched in Kingdom ways.

That's the path that leads to blessing – not just in terms of temporary things. Those acts of love and caring will ripple out till Kingdom comes in all its fullness. And there they will endure.



Some first nations people have a principle they hold dear: That we should always consider the consequences of our actions, looking to the future – even *seven* generations down the road. It aims for sustainability and care for God's creation. And this applies to our relationships as well.



When we see that each one has value in the eyes of God ... when we understand that *our* future prosperity and flourishing is bound up together with *theirs* ... Then maybe we'll start building bridges across divides. Maybe things that keep us separate won't seem to matter quite so much anymore. Neighbour-love will conquer selfishness. And long-term vision replace will short-sighted promise of gain. And so the way of Jesus will prevail.



Remember how we said at the beginning that these words of Jesus are called the “Sermon on the plain?” They're spoken on a level place, not a mountain. In this sermon, the high are brought down and the lowly are lifted up. Things are *levelled* out.

We're told there were people from Judah and Jerusalem, and as far away as the region of Tyre and Sidon. That's traditional enemy territory! But there they were, *together*. In God's bright new world there is room enough for everyone. That may surprise us. It may also be our salvation.

When you go home today, think of those divisions in your life. And how the grace of God in Jesus may be inviting you to see the world, your neighbour, the member of your family with whom you have some disagreement, in a different light. The Kingdom brings us together for a life of great blessing. And we receive it with joy and gratitude. May it be so! Amen.