

“Living Between Blessing and Woe”
February 13, 2022
Scripture: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

The assignment of blessings and woes, or curses, is a fairly common practice in scripture. And it's not a random distribution. What makes a person blessed is dependent on certain qualities or behaviors, and the same goes for what makes them cursed. This week in our lectionary, for instance, the psalm chosen is Psalm 1, the very first. That psalm makes it very clear that those who are happy, or blessed, find delight in the Law of the Lord. Jeremiah echoes that when he tells his people: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals...Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.”

For these writers, and many others in scripture, a person's status is discerned through their choices. And I think most of us would agree with that. If we think of blessing and woe as conditions of the spirit, as sort of our standing in relation to God, then we have a certain control over that. We can choose where we put our trust. What Jeremiah found so maddening about the leadership of his day was their refusal to trust God by putting their fate in the hands of diplomacy and messaging. At one point he tells the people, “Do not trust in these deceptive words, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’” He's mocking religious leaders who claim they are protected from disaster by virtue of their status as God's chosen no matter how much they violate Torah. But they could change and experience blessing if they put their trust in God.

Even though Jeremiah's message is mostly negative, he does still hold out the possibility that things could change. It all depends on their willingness to trust. Jesus offers a sort of different option. For Jesus, at least in Luke's understanding, blessing and woe are dependent on our status in the world: poor or rich; hungry or full; weeping or laughing. These are what determine blessings or woes. It's a very materialistic vision. And it makes me wonder where we stand in Jesus' estimation.

He offers a binary choice: you either are blessed or you are full of woe. Does he mean that there's no alternative? How is someone in that crowd listening to him supposed to think about their place in the world? I don't think that Jesus was trying to trigger some kind of class war, but it's pretty likely that the people in that crowd were mostly very poor. I doubt they were starving or anything, but still I suspect most of them struggled every day. So, these words must have been pretty encouraging.

But outside of that context, in our time and in our circumstances, should we be encouraged by his words? What hope is there for us when our lives are so rich and our bellies so full?

One place I like to go when I come across words like this in the gospels is a collection of conversations on the gospels called *The Gospel of Solentiname*. It's a compilation of discussions between groups of peasant farmers in Nicaragua called “base communities” and their priest Father Ernesto Cardenal. While discussing this passage the students had some interesting

responses. One student named Laureano says, “This is very revolutionary. He says that all those who are well-off are going to be screwed. This turns the tables completely.” Some of the others were a bit more nuanced in their understanding. One named Olivia says, “I think what Jesus is condemning in them is lack of feeling. Because you have to have a hard heart to be happy while others are suffering, to be full of food while others are hungry—maybe the very people that work for them.” While they agree Jesus makes a clear option for the poor, there is still hope for those who are rich. Another student even says that all of it is meant to liberate the rich from their enslavement to greed.

These students, poor as they are, refuse to accept that Jesus is offering an all or nothing proposition, blessing or woe. They seem to believe it’s possible to live somewhere between the two. And, honestly, everything we learn of Jesus and his teachings in Luke’s gospel seems to bear that out. Many of his stories describe people who are rich yet faithful. Every now and then we come across people who have overcome their wealth to follow Jesus.

The key to making that transition seems to be a shift in where they place their trust. It seems what people always struggle with is how they define their value. Whether it’s Jeremiah’s time, Jesus’ day, or today we’re constantly challenged to give up placing our trust in materialism, what we can produce and consume. Jesus invites his followers to do that completely, to give up all possessions. Jeremiah and the psalms encourage those who listen to put all their trust in God, to meditate on God’s word day and night, to the exclusion of all else. But none of us can do that. None of us can experience only blessing. The most we can hope for is to live somewhere between blessing and woe.

Jesus invites us to let go of our dependence on wealth and security, to resist placing our trust in mere mortals, as Jeremiah would say, and risk putting our trust in God’s kingdom. In God’s kingdom people living in poverty are given higher priority when it comes to healthcare and educational opportunities than those of us who have easy access to those things. In God’s kingdom hunger is met with relief that restores dignity and addresses food deserts that exist in underserved neighborhoods. In God’s kingdom investments are made in housing that’s affordable and can lead to ownership rather than keeping people trapped in overpriced rental units.

But moving toward blessing and away from woe comes with a cost, and not just material. When Jesus says we’re blessed when people revile and exclude, defame and even hate us for following him, he’s talking about the response we’ll get for promoting God’s kingdom. Just like Jeremiah was hated by the leaders of his day when he called on the people not to trust them, we’ll be hated by those in our society who only measure value in material goods and refuse to see the value of God’s kingdom. Living between blessing and woe can be very unpleasant and maybe even a little dangerous.

But if we don’t take that step, if we don’t make the choice to turn away from dependence on wealth for our security, if we don’t begin to put our trust in God, we’ll never experience the blessing God desires us to know. If we can’t turn our lives around, we’ll never become the partners in repairing this world God calls us to be. And God will seek other partners. *Because*

God refuses to give up on us. God refuses to stop calling anyone who will listen and respond, anyone willing to walk the journey from a life of woe to the blessing of God's kingdom.

Amen