

THE POWER TO BLESS

Luke 6:17-26

February 16, 2025

What does it mean to be blessed?

I'll tell you what the internet thinks. One only needs to scroll through a few of the more than 157 million posts that include #blessed on Instagram to start to get an idea.

There's the young man posed to look candid next to a luxury car. A picture of a gourmet meal in a fancy restaurant. A body builder on the beach. An athlete on the field. A happy couple, all smiles. A woman overlooking a gorgeous mountaintop vista. Designer watches, shoes, and handbags. Some friends poolside at a resort. #blessed!

Enter Jesus, who in his "Sermon on the Plain" challenges us to rethink everything that we know about what it means to be blessed. Our modern version of being blessed, that blissful state when things are going pretty well and you have something to show for it, that version looks eerily similar to Jesus' portrayal of "woe."

Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full, woe to you who are laughing, woe to you when people speak well of you...

He's using "woe" here in contrast to "blessed," but it's important to know that "woe" doesn't mean "cursed." The Greek word that is being translated as "woe," that word is *ouai*, is really more of a sound that is meant to catch our attention, like *yikes*, or, *uh oh*. "Yikes to you who are rich." "Uh oh to you who are full..."

We may be more accustomed to Matthew's version of the Beatitudes: *blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...* There are no "woes" in Matthew's version. It's possible that we're more familiar with Matthew's version from the Sermon on the Mount (as it is known) *because we like it more*. It's softer, a little more inclusive. No words of caution or "yikes," only blessing.

There is nothing soft or spiritualized about Luke's version. In Luke's gospel, Jesus addresses the *immediate material and bodily needs of the people*. Blessed are you who are poor now. Blessed are you who are hungry now. Blessed are you who weep now.

Our ear wants to hear these statements as instructive, as if we must *become* poor or hungry in order to be blessed. While Jesus has plenty to say throughout his life and ministry about wealth and possessions as an obstacle to faithful living, the true sense of his words here is less instructive – "do *this* in order to be blessed" – and more performative. Blessings! Jesus is offering blessings to the poor, to the hungry, to the weeping. He has come down from the mountain. He is surrounded by his disciples and apostles and a great multitude of people from near and far, we are told. Many are seeking healing. And to his disciples and to all who have ears to hear, Jesus speaks into reality God's new reign that has long been foretold. We heard it a few chapters earlier in Luke's gospel in the Magnificat, in Mary's words during her pregnancy praising God in the company of her cousin, Elizabeth:

Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

When you bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly, you end up on something like a level plain, the very setting of this sermon more than thirty years after Mary spoke these joyful words of praise. Here we find Jesus preaching, teaching, healing, enacting what has long been promised, the arrival of God's kingdom, and the great reversal that it brings.

Jesus offers blessings, not on the rich and well-to-do, but on the vulnerable and the hurting.

New Testament scholar NT Wright offers us this translation of Jesus' words from Greek to English:

Blessings on the poor: God's kingdom belongs to you!
 Blessings on those who are hungry today: You'll have a feast!
 Blessings on those who weep today: You will laugh!

Again, we must ask: what does it mean to be blessed?

Catholic priest, professor, and writer Henri Nouwen tells a story about a woman named Janet. Janet was a member of L'Arche Daybreak, a community for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Nouwen was the pastor of this community for a time, and one day, Janet—a member of the community—approached him before a prayer service and asked, "Henri, can you give me a blessing?" His automatic response was to trace the sign of the cross on her forehead. But she stopped him right away and said, "No, that doesn't work. I need a *real* blessing!" So, Henri was a little puzzled by this. And he thought for a moment and didn't know what to do, but agreed to give her a "real blessing" during the prayer service. He knew that something special was required of him and began to ponder just what that might be.

The Holy Spirit led, as she is known to do. When the time for that "real blessing" came, Henri embraced Janet and said these words,

"Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Child. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know, Janet, that you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and by all the people who are here with you."

Janet's smile said it all. *This* was a real blessing.

Here we are challenged to understand being blessed not as a state of being afforded by circumstances, but rather as a gift to be received. This gift has nothing to do—nothing at all to do—with our material or bodily circumstances, but in

Henri Nouwen's words, it has to do with our *Belovedness*. Nouwen writes, "to give a blessing is to affirm, to say 'yes' to a person's Belovedness. And more than that: To give a blessing creates the reality of which it speaks...a blessing touches the original goodness of the other and calls forth his or her Belovedness."

Nouwen recalls going to the synagogue with a Jewish friend and discovering that there was to be a bar mitzvah that day, a celebration of a young man turning thirteen and becoming an adult in that community. Nouwen and his friend did not have any connection with this young man or with his family, but they watched as the young man read from Genesis and received blessings from his rabbi and his parents. It was the blessing from the parents that touched Nouwen the most. In the presence of the whole gathered community, the father blessed his son, saying, "Son, whatever will happen to you in this life, whether you have success or not, whether you become important or not, whether you will be healthy or not, always remember how much your mother and I love you."

In Nouwen's words, "What grace such a blessing is!"

This understanding of blessing as having to do with our God-given belovedness also gives us a new perspective on Jesus' words of woe. It's not being rich or full or without a care in the world that makes you blessed; woe or uh oh or yikes to that! Yikes if we believe that this is where our worth comes from. Yikes if we internalize the lie of possessions and achievements and social standing as the source and sign of blessing. Yikes if our own contentment leads to an obsession with ourselves and an inability to see the belovedness of others and respond to their needs.

In that crowd of people, Jesus begins with blessings. Disciples and apostles, sick and well, seeking and searching, from near and far, a lot like this crowd gathered here today—Jesus sees the vulnerable and the hurting, and offers words of blessing to those who need it most, to those who needed to be reminded of their belovedness.

Blessings on the poor: God's kingdom belongs to you!
 Blessings on the hungry today: You'll have a feast!
 Blessings on those who weep today: You will laugh again.

These blessings name and call forth the belovedness of God's children, and they also hold a promise for the righting of what's wrong, for a place for the excluded, for bread for the hungry.

These aren't empty words. Jesus in his ministry will feed the hungry and embrace the grieving and the excluded in real and tangible ways. But did you catch it? These blessings are for the vulnerable and the hurting, but there is an unspoken call here for everyone else, for the disciples and the apostles in the crowd, for those who seek to follow in the way of Jesus and to inhabit his kingdom—and yes, this includes us as much as it included his original hearers.

In offering these blessings, Jesus shines a light for his followers, for his disciples, for his apostles, for us, showing us who we must serve, who we must bless. Jesus shines a light on the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, and the excluded. If we truly seek to follow Christ, we will partner with him to bring these blessings to life, to fulfill them so that the hungry are indeed filled, so that the feast that has been promised is not just the feast at God's heavenly table *one* day, but a feast at the dinner table *today*.

St. Teresa of Avila puts it like this:

Christ has no body but yours,
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks
 Compassion on this world,
 Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
 Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
 Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
 Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
 Christ has no body now but yours.

Friends, the blessings that Jesus spoke are ours to bring to life: God's kingdom, come; God's will, done.

You all know as well as I do that our world is in desperate need of blessing. In a politically divided and painful time, people of faith know that it grieves God's heart when we dishonor the image of God in each other, when we trample upon that which God has called good. In a world of so much hatred and vitriol, where we are so quick to demean and dehumanize, perhaps part of our call as disciples and apostles of Jesus is to be a people of blessing,

a people who insist on the belovedness of all God's children: migrants and trans people, the disabled and the depressed, the hungry and the poor, all created and loved by God with an everlasting love.

So what do you say, Church? Can we turn from being #blessed and get into the business of blessing? Can we bring to life those blessings spoken by Jesus? Can we insist on the belovedness of those our world would rather toss aside? Can we hasten the day when the hungry are filled and the weeping know laughter and joy?

We can, and we must. Amen.