#blessed

Sarah Wolf

February 17, 2019

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Luke 6:17-26

Last week as my sister and I were driving from Galveston, TX, to Atlanta, we noticed a set of billboards that kept popping up in Texas and Louisiana. As the miles crawled by, we saw them one after another — Blessed are the poor in spirit….blessed are the merciful….blessed are the peacemakers. And then beneath the beatitude, a smiling picture of a lawyer and then beneath that, the phone number to his firm.

When Natalie and I saw the first one, we commented to each other that it seemed to be an odd way to advertise your law services. The only beatitude that I could see being useful for the lawyer is the “blessed are those who mourn” one as he had other billboards advertising his services for wrongful death suits.

I should pause here to say that I warned John that in his absence, I would be making a few lawyer jokes in my sermon, and he said that would be fine.

Blessed is the associate pastor whose senior pastor has a great sense of humor.

But the more I saw these billboards, and the more I thought about today’s lectionary passage, the more bothered I became by them. The sentiment expressed in the billboards felt hollow. Our Gospel lesson today is Luke’s version of the beatitudes, not the better-known version in Matthew. The lawyer had a choice between two versions of the beatitudes, and he chose Matthew’s.

The beatitudes in the gospel of Matthew are comforting:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

And so on.

Matthew’s beatitudes offer promises of salvation and redemption. They are worded in a way in which we can all place ourselves in them. We have all mourned for the loss of someone or something dear. We have all felt poor in spirit at one time or another. And who among us, when confronted by injustice, does not hunger and thirst for righteousness? We’ve been there.

When I was a campus minister in Memphis, we spent an entire semester studying Matthew’s beatitudes. We examined them one by one, week by week. We discussed what it meant to be poor in spirit, to be merciful, and to be peacemakers. We called our worship series #blessed.

For anyone who needs a refresher course (or maybe a first course!) on hashtags, a hashtag is a label (that looks like the pound sign) that you can assign to a picture that might describe it.

For example, if I put a picture of our congregation today on Instagram, I could add the labels, “Covenant,” “Staunton,” “PCUSA,” “handbells,” and after last month’s handbell performance, “flyingmallets.” You could then click on the different labels and find other pictures that have the same label or hashtag.

Hashtags are a point of connection for people to find other posts and photos that have the same label. And #blessed is one of the most popular.

 As of 2:15 yesterday afternoon, 106 million photos on Instagram had #blessed tagged somewhere in their captions. If you click on the hashtag, you’ll see a variety of pictures in which the post-ee has added the hashtag to their caption. There are some lovely pictures — photos of newborn babies, of grandparents, of friends who have known each other for years and years. But then there are some that make you scratch your chin — photos of ice cream cones, luxury cars, and even some from fans excited to meet Tom Brady.

My college students chose to use #blessed for our worship series as our tongue-in-cheek way of acknowledging how overused that word has become. It has become a throw away word in our society.

When we see the word “blessed” in Matthew’s beatitudes, our eyes may start to glaze over at the repetition of this word. Have you ever repeated a word over and over in your head until it stopped being a real word with a meaning attached to it? In some ways, we’ve done this to the word “blessed.”

I want to be clear that I believe that God blesses us each and every day. Morning by morning new mercies we see. But if we view a great parking space at the mall at Christmas time as proof of God’s blessings in our lives, then we have lost sight of what it truly means to be blessed.

I am grateful for the beatitudes in Matthew, but they only offer one side of the equation. By only remembering Matthew’s beatitudes, we can be guilty of watering down the true meaning of Jesus’s blessings.

Luke’s version of the beatitudes goes a little further in showing what it means to be truly blessed, and then prompts us to action.

One big difference between Matthew and Luke’s beatitudes is language.

Where in Matthew, Jesus proclaims, “blessed are the poor in spirit” and “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” in Luke, Jesus drops the “in spirit” and the “for righteousness.” In Luke, Jesus is focused on the physically poor and hungry.

And Jesus is not just talking to the people who can’t afford the finer things in life. He’s talking to the destitute.

In the Greek class system, there were different concepts of poverty. There was the poor, meaning people who often owned a small piece of land or property, but who still had to work for a living. And then there was the word that we find in Luke’s beatitude - ptochos (ptowxov) - which means the destitute. It's a word used for someone who has absolutely nothing. The word literally means “one who crouches and cowers.” It’s the word that would have been reserved for people who begged on the streets, whose postures indicate that they are at the total mercy of passersby.

When Jesus says, “blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” he’s talking to those who have nothing left. One commentary writer describes the destitute in this beatitude saying, “the destitute poor have no one to turn to but to God. God watches over them and blesses them abundantly in God’s way, not the way of the world: they will be filled, and they will laugh, and they will inherit the kingdom of God … To be blessed of God is to have nothing but God.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

This is the big difference between Matthew and Luke. In Matthew’s beatitudes, we can sneak ourselves in. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Poor in spirit? I’ve been there. But in Luke’s beatitude, we have to take a step back and ask ourselves, “Am I destitute?” Do I really have nothing and no one to turn to but God? For most of us, the answer is no. We are not.

Luke’s beatitudes are hard, y’all.

Because Jesus doesn’t end there with the blessings. He blesses the poor and the hungry and the ridiculed. And then he switches gears and changes his focus to those who have more than enough. For every blessing in these beatitudes, there is a corresponding woe.

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.

The woe section in this text startles us. It is jarring. This isn’t the peaceful Jesus we encounter in Matthew’s beatitudes.

If we were having a hard time finding our location in the blessings part in Luke’s beatitudes, unfortunately, we may have a much easier time finding ourselves in the woes.

What are we to do with these woes? Is Jesus calling us to literally sell everything we have? To give all of our food away? To dress ourselves in sackcloth and ashes?

I don’t think so. But I do think he’s calling us to be uncomfortable.

Commentary writer David Ostendorf describes the woe section as God “not [taking] kindly to halfheartedness.” He writes, “God does not bless us as we maintain the status quo, repeating the accolades of those who hear us and follow us. God does not bless us as we bathe in respectability in the eye of the world. God does not bless us as we quietly maintain tradition and gloss over or ignore prophetic voices calling us back to God — in the church *and* in the world. God does not bless us as we protect and build institutions and empires. God does not bless us, well off, full, comfortable, hearty, and well spoken of.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

I think these woes disturb us, because for many of us, we’ve forgotten what it’s like to be hungry, forgotten what it’s like to be wanderers, forgotten what it’s like to be destitute. We feel more in line with the ones Jesus is calling out — those who are well-fed, with roofs over our heads.

But the farther removed we are from being among God’s blessed people — the outcast, the lonely, and the lost — the farther away we are from the kingdom of God.

Ana Maria Pineda, director of the Hispanic Ministries Program at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, describes radical hospitality by telling the story of a Latino couple, Maria and Antonio, who left everything in their homeland to come to the United States. They worked hard and built a life for themselves in their new city, all the while longing one day to return to their home country.

Over the years, their home became a haven for other people like them, who had also come to the United States looking for a better life. Pineda writes that Maria and Antonio had lost count of how many people they had opened their home to, but that they do it because they remember what it was like to arrive in a new and strange land, where the language, the food, and the culture were all foreign.

Pineda suggests that it is “less difficult for marginalized communities to reach out than for those long-settled to do so. Those who have been strangers themselves have developed an empathy for others who confront a similar reality.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

She makes the argument that within our Biblical story, God’s people are “spiritually descended from migrants and wanderers, and that all are called to hospitality.” Pineda’s experience working with Hispanic communities suggests that because the Hispanic community places such an emphasis on responding to the needs of the poor, the alien, the marginalized, there is a relatively low rate of homelessness among Hispanic communities.

How quickly we forget, friends. How quickly we forget what it’s like to be new, to be hungry, to be an outsider.

Jesus’s woes in Luke aren’t a final sentence. They are an invitation to discipleship. An invitation to let go of the things that hinder us from fully loving God and from receiving God’s blessing.

God blesses us when we get uncomfortable — when we let go. God blesses us when we look at our congregation and ask, “who is missing?” God blesses us when we look to the people on the margins of our society and invite them in — when we listen, truly listen to the things that they need, be it housing, food, or love.

God blesses us when, as an act of discipleship, we practice radical hospitality.

This call to discipleship isn’t always easy. There may be stumbles along the way — misunderstandings and miscommunications.

But these beatitudes in Luke call us not to be complacent with our status in the world, but to cast aside those things that give us a false sense of security, and instead place our security in the promises that Jesus offers in the kingdom of God.

Then, and only then, will we truly be #blessed.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Feasting on the Word [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Feasting on the Word; Ostendorf; page 360 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ana Maria Pineda. “Hospitality”. Practicing Our Faith. 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)