***THOSE OTHER BEATITUDES***

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Texts: Luke 6:17-26 and Psalm 1

*“For everything there is a season,*

*and a time for every matter under heaven.”*

Those familiar words from Ecclesiastes are the prelude to a list of contrasts, each of which has its own time:

 *a time to be born and a time to die,*

 *a time to plant and a time to reap,*

 *a time to kill and a time to heal,*

 *a time to keep silence and a time to speak…*

Included in that list is one of those contrasts we heard in the beatitudes from Luke’s Gospel a moment ago: *a time to weep and a time to laugh*. I can’t help but wonder if Jesus didn’t intend for those other beatitudes to evoke echoes of Ecclesiastes as well, reminding the disciples that life is full of choices and is always changing, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse – and encouraging them to strive for the better way. From his own beatitudes Jesus might have added to that list of the wise writer in Ecclesiastes:

*a time to be rich and a time to be poor,*

*a time to be full and a time to be hungry,*

*a time to be esteemed and a time to be reviled,*

and perhaps most daunting: *a time for blessings and a time for woes.*

Most of us (except perhaps the Eeyores) prefer the blessings to the woes, just as we prefer laughter to weeping. But as Jesus describes them in these beatitudes in Luke, it is the poor and hungry and reviled who are blessed while those who are rich and full and esteemed by their neighbors are the subject of woes. Given the choice all of us would choose to be rich and full and esteemed by neighbors, and yet says Jesus, those are the ones to whom the woes are directed. The reality of life is that both may have their time; life is full of blessings, but it also has times of woe from which none of us can escape, and times when the woes offer cautious warnings to us about the choices we make.

 A beatitude is a blessing. The Bible is full of blessings and beatitudes. It begins with God’s blessing of humankind, that blessing that inspires all math teachers, “*Be fruitful and multiply*.” And it ends with God’s blessing upon those who keep the words of the prophecy in Revelation. From the lips of the psalmist and from the lips of Jesus and from the very lips of God pour forth blessings.

*Blessed are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked*, as you heard

this morning in Psalm 1

*Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven.*

*Blessed are those who observe justice.*

*Blessed are those who fear the Lord.*

*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.*

And those blessings that you might be most familiar with from Matthew’s version of Jesus’ beatitudes:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*

*Blessed are the meek.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*

Blessed, blessed, blessed – the Bible is full of blessed blessings and surely that is a good thing. But what does it mean to be so blessed?

The Greek word *makarios* is the word translated as *blessing* in the New Testament. Like its Hebrew counterpart, it has two related meanings. The first is to be *happy* or *contented*. To be blessed may be to be happy; that is not to say that all who are blessed are brimming with smiles. “*Blessed are those who mourn*,” says Jesus. “*Blessed are you who weep*.” A blessing doesn’t guarantee a smile. It offers the promise of smiles on the other side of tears. It offers hope – hope derived from that other meaning of *makarios* – *to be favored by God*. To be blessed is to enjoy God’s good favor, to know that God cares for you, looks out for you, and has good plans for you. To be blessed is to live in God’s firm promises and thus to know that the future is good even if the present is bad. A blessing ***now*** offers strength for the present and hope for the future, hope with which to live amid the difficulties of today.

Such is the case with the beatitudes we heard in Luke’s gospel this morning. Most of us prefer those other beatitudes spoken in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel, the ones that offer only blessings, no woes: *Blessed are the poor in spirit;* *blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. At one time or another we all have been poor in spirit or hungered for righteousness for ourselves or for others, and so we can readily identify with those beatitudes. But Luke quotes Jesus saying simply, “*Blessed are those who are poor”*, not the poor in spirit; “*blessed are those who hunger”*, not those who hunger for righteousness. For those of us who have not been hungry or poor, it is hard to find ourselves blessed by those words of Jesus and more likely the subject of woes as those who are full and rich! In those beatitudes are echoes of Mary’s Magnificat: *The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones*

*and lifted up the lowly;*

*the Lord has filled the hungry with good things,*

*and sent the rich away empty*.

In other words, the Lord turns the ways of the world upside down in order to put things right side up!

It seems odd to think of the poor and hungry as blessed. None of us wants to be so blessed if poverty or hunger is the precursor to the blessing. Yet Jesus’ says, “*Blessed are you who are poor and hungry.”* He does not say *blessed will you be, but blessed* ***are*** *you*. How can those who are poor and hungry be blessed? Perhaps it is the blessing of knowing they enjoy God’s favor even if they have little tangible evidence to prove it. In the face of hopeless, even desperate situations, the beatitude offers reassurance and hope, reason to live with joy when to the world there seems little joy possible. It is an affirmation of God’s continued favor upon those whom the world seems to have disfavored, reassurance of God’s continuing love and care for those who may feel forgotten. It is not the assurance that God ***WILL*** be with them, but rather the assurance that God ***IS*** with them.

Some years ago, we supported a student in Ethiopia by the name of Fetene Nemera. Illubabor Synod asked if we would help to send Fetene to college to secure his degree in finance. Fetene was the sole support for his mother, and the total cost to meet the needs of Fetene and his mother for the year – for the whole year – was $1,250. On a visit to Ethiopia Lynn Connette delivered that sum from us to the Synod office for Fetene, visited with him, and then sent this note:

*I wanted to let your folks know that I had a wonderful evening this evening with Fetene Nemera. What an amazing person! He spoke of his deep appreciation for Covenant’s support and sends his prayers of thanks to God for you.*

*He lives in a 7x10 foot cinderblock room in a row of similar rooms. There is basically just enough room for a bed, a low pillow upon which he sits and a small table. There was absolutely nothing else in his room. He pays $20.00 a month for the room – which includes access to water, electricity, a bathroom and a stove. The college he attends does not have housing.*

*His studies are going very well. He is making very good grades and is having the time of his life. Exams are in two weeks and he would appreciate your prayers. His English was very good, too!*

*A young girl brought us tea with cloves and bread with honey. We read scripture, prayed and talked a lot about God’s providential care. When you are sitting in such a humble, dark, room like that – when you look and see that Fetene has tied inner tubes around his legs below the knee to serve as pants – no shoes – and when you see that his brother has come to Addis to carry Fetene when needed and to bring food to him for the duration of Fetene's four years of education (Fetene is crippled and has neither wheelchair nor braces to get around) – when you see all that and then you see them cry with appreciation for God’s love and mercy upon them – you begin to realize that the most beautiful, golden palace in the world cannot compare to the richness of God’s love for “the least of these.”*

With tears in his eyes Fetene Nemera gave thanks to God for us from the floor of a barren 7x10 foot room on the other side of the world. *Blessed are you who are poor,* says Jesus*, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.* The kingdom of heaven belongs to the Fetene Nemeras, to those who are poor and find even in their humble surroundings the blessings of God for which to give thanks and praise.

 How much more we have – more room in our homes, more shoes for our feet, more clothes for our bodies, more food for our stomachs, more strength in our limbs. Yet, we can have no more faith, no more hope, no more joy, no more blessing than that which he knows and in which he lives. How humbling it is to find such faith and to contrast it with our own; how humbling to be prayed for by a man who seems to have so little and yet has so much.

Perhaps the poor and hungry and weeping and oppressed know something more of God’s presence by which to live blessed lives, while those of us who are comfortable and full and seemingly happy forget from whom those blessings flow. Perhaps they are more aware of God’s presence and care for them because they have so many needs, while we whose needs are largely met, take God for granted and dare to ask for more. Woe to us who feel no need for God and forget the God who blesses us! Woe to us who seek to garner praise from the world instead of seeking to please God! Woe to us who follow the prosperity preachers and pray for wealth and things rather than recognizing that those things may stand in the way of our relationship with God.

Growing closer to God is not getting more things, but neither is it just getting rid of the stuff that fills your house, closets, and lives. It isn’t just emptying out; it is also filling that space with the right things, with holy things, with righteous things. It can be as dangerous to idolize poverty as it is to idolize wealth. But less can be more. Less things and less time, money and energy spent acquiring, maintaining and inventorying things – can mean more time, energy and money for God. Less commitment to things can mean more commitment to God, and in that commitment more joy for living. The same might be said about the esteem of neighbors; the basis by which the world esteems success – power and wealth at the expense of righteousness – is empty praise. For what really is of value is integrity and faith and faithfulness to Christ’s call to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as yourself! Blessed are you when that is the path you take, says the psalmist, says Jesus!

We who are blessed have the opportunity to be a blessing to others, to those who are poor and hungry, to those who have needs that go unsatisfied, to those who weep, to those who are cold and need a blanket, to those who suffer as a result of faithfulness to Christ’s call – if we will only be faithful! And when we are weeping or hungry or in hard times, we are assured that then too we are blessed by the God who loves us without end and calls us to be faithful in all seasons of our lives. There is no season for unfaithfulness, no season for selfishness, no time to be greedy! Faithfulness is always in season! May you be so faithful and so be a blessing and so be blessed! Amen