

*Heavenly Father, grant us the grace to see the world through your eyes; to embrace the blessings and woes you give as guides for our lives. Amen*

#### Luke 6: 17-36

One of the things in this scripture reading that got my curiosity was the plain or the level place where Jesus came and preached. It's a place we can relate to. We're flatlanders around here. Peddy-nauss is the greek word for plain or level area and is the same word used to describe a place of the dead and lowly. A place of disgrace, suffering misery and mourning. Of the poor and the poor in spirit. Of the hungry and those who hunger for God. Notice Jesus does not come down TO them, he comes down WITH them to the lowest of places.

We all remember the sermon on the mount.....Jesus overlooking the landscape with his disciples, telling them how to live a godly life. He's up on a mountain stage in a position of authority. But here, Jesus comes to a level place. He comes down with the people at their level. Fully human. A place filled with death and disease and suffering. The sermon on the plain shows the human side of Jesus.

The sermon on the plain is a level playing field. It's an equal space for the poor and the wealthy; the hungry and the full. It's a place every person can relate to, then and now. Jesus comes down with the crowds and speaks plain words. Not an elaborate speech with big words. Simple words. Simple blessings. A plain message.

Today's readings have a lot of ups and downs don't they? Blessings and curses. We always like to hear about the blessings don't we? The beatitudes give a warm fuzzy feeling that everything will be ok. Today's message on the other hand, makes us just a

little uncomfortable doesn't it? Woe to the rich. Woe to the full. Woe to you who laugh. Woe when people speak well of you. Aren't those all the things we strive for?

I am pretty sure I would rather be rich than poor. Full rather than hungry. Laugh than cry. And of course, we all want to be liked. Today's message is one that makes us a little uncomfortable; avoid eye contact and squirm in our seats and wait for the bad parts to be over. Not only are blessings reduced to just 4 in number, today they come with 4 woes that aren't so warm and fuzzy.

The sermon on the plain is a lot about expectations. Prophets had been teaching of Jesus' coming. Crowds gathered to see this moment in history, to gain healing and hear this great message. People came from miles around. From Judea and Jerusalem, the Seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. People journeyed sometimes over 50 miles just to witness this occasion. I don't know if you've studied a map of the holy land, but this isn't all flat ground either. Jerusalem is up in the mountains and Judea over the far side of the mountain ; Tyre and Sidon on the coast. All of it is a desert which mean through sand. And most people traveled by foot. This was a big deal! This Jesus was going to bring all the happiness in the world! Jews and Gentiles alike came to see this man and hear his message! This was a big deal!

Well Jesus does not disappoint. Immediately we are told those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. Power came out from him and healed them all. He healed them. He healed them. As he begins to speak he brings blessings to the poor and hungry. Things are doing really well. I imagine about now the people are pretty giddy about this Jesus guy. Every person can relate to words to the poor and the hungry. Can't you just picture the excitement!?! The crowds gathered to witness and

experience the healing and the promise of what the prophets foretold. I imagine it's was a lot like when the President comes to town today. People come for miles around to hear the great promises. To be a part of history. The event is all over social media; it's the big news.

Everything is going well up until it isn't. It's like Jesus says, But wait, there's more. Then comes the woes. This is NOT the message the people came for. Every worldly status was discarded by Jesus. I can imagine more than a few people walked out at this point. I can imagine the reaction of the crowds..."But Jesus! That's not fair!" "come on, we don't have to listen to this!" Those same words that makes us a little uncomfortable today. Woe to you. Jesus is direct. Woe to me and you.

I think we often mistake earthly possessions, wealth and happiness for blessings. We like the word blessing. We like to equate blessing as a reward. The woes sound an awful lot like punishment and we'd rather just skip over that part. But really Jesus is describing the ups and downs of our daily lives. Just when we think things are going well, when we're "happy" something bad happens and back down we go. Earthly happiness; riches and full bellies, popularity....they only last so long. God's promise is eternity. It's bigger than this world.

Luke is calling us to reconsider our preconceived notions of being blessed and to embrace the reversals that Jesus presents. His writing is meant to startle us from complacency and inspire us. Author David Ostendorf writes, "God does not bless us as we maintain the status quo, reaping the accolades of those who hear us and follow us. God does not bless us as we bathe in respectability in the eyes 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....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.”

Remember our gospel text from Mark a few months ago? “it is easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than to enter the kingdom of God”. It’s easy to lose focus when we think things are going well. We relax a bit and enjoy the high times. We relax a bit and lose our focus on God. We are blessed amidst our troubles and suffering. This turns out to be NOT a gospel of comfort, but a gospel of challenge to embrace the world with the love and eyes of Jesus to live for the kingdom God created. A challenge to focus on the kingdom of God and his promises.

Jesus condemns those who neglect the ways of God. He overthrows common culture expectations of the pursuit of happiness. Reading the words of Jesus I wonder why we spend so much time praying for the sick and suffering, yet seldom pray for the wealthy or healthy. We are so well trained to believe our happiness is related to our success in our worldly life. Writer Michael Marsh suggests our prayers of the church should sound something like this:

We pray today for the rich in bondage to their assets. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. For all who are full and successful but have no satisfaction or meaning, Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. For all who laugh or smile to hide or avoid the pain in their life, Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. For all who seek and find their identity and value in being spoken well of by others, Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Marsh suggests that we don’t pray for them because they look and sound “Happy” and for most of us, happiness is our goal. Maybe we don’t pray like that because it sounds too much like our own lives. Let me say that again. Maybe we don’t

pray like that because it sounds too much like our own lives. What if, though, the goal in our lives is not happiness, but meaning. If the gospel isn't just a program for happiness, but guideposts for living a life of meaning. What if blessings are not rewards and woes are not punishments? Not different people, but parts of each of our lives.

The greek word makarios, or blessing, means more than happiness or good fortune. It indicates a sense of righteousness and being in a right relationship with God. To be blessed is living in an awareness of the presence of God. It is not to be free from struggle. We have heard about a similar message from Mary in Luke 1. Mary's Song of Praise reads like this:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

Mary knew what it meant to be blessed. She knew the goal in her life was not happiness but meaning. When Jesus spoke about the blessings and woes he was and is, leveling the ups and downs in our lives. He is reminding us to find our right focus in Him; to adjust our expectations to God rather than the things of the world.

Perhaps Jesus is saying Woe to us who **just** want to be happy. So I will ask you today, What gives your life not just happiness today, but meaning?

*Set our hearts, oh Lord, on your blessings and promises, that we remain steadfast in all circumstances. Thanks be to God. Amen*