

“Blessed”

Luke 6:17-26

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A recovery group, anonymously meeting in the back of a church. The waiting room of an emergency department full of pain in pain, praying with urgency for answers and help. A funeral home gathering room, friends and family looking through photos, sharing stories, full of gratitude for a life well lived but also pouring out grief at this loss they were never going to be ready for.

When we are troubled, in pain, in need of healing, we tuck ourselves away into private spaces and quiet corners. We only open the door to let in those we most trust, sometimes so lost in our sorrow that we don't hear the knocking and forget to open the door at all. When it comes time to go out in public, to be seen by others, we dry our tears, fix our hair, and show the world our most put together self.

The narrator of Luke's Gospel describes something different. A time and a place when people are not only longing for healing and hope, but are longing to be seen. So they come out of their homes. They leave the privacy and gather together with a great crowd, all of them with identities or experiences that might have labeled them as outcasts, broken, less than, all of them sharing in common one thing: a desire to hear the storyteller and be healed of their disease, a longing to touch the prophet and be known in their weakness, in their agony.

Jesus sees the crowds, but when he speaks, he addresses his disciples. I'm always curious about this distinction. I wonder if at this moment the disciples have set themselves apart from the crowds. The crowds need healing, the disciples help Jesus heal. The crowds are hungry, the disciples prepare the bread and cook the fish. The crowds are grieving, the disciples wipe away tears. I wonder if this lesson of Blessings and Woes is meant to draw the disciples back into the crowd, to realize there is no separation, that the way toward God is not about earning favor but about something else that looks a lot like vulnerability.

Today we are more apt to place ourselves in the role of the disciples. We wonder what it means to follow Jesus. We come together to organize and plan and enact ways we can care about others - ways we can reach out to those out there who are broken by life's circumstances. We share small parts of our lives, but we are even quicker to point out someone else who has it worse. Instead of letting someone say, "I see your pain" we say "Let's focus on that group of people - they are more in need." What is it that keeps the disciples huddled to the side away from the crowd? What is it that keeps us trying to distinguish ourselves from everyone else?

There is privilege, to be sure. We are swimming in it. Economic privilege allows us to surround ourselves with enough things that people don't see our suffering. We buy bigger homes that are away from our neighbors. We buy taller fences to keep out prying eyes. We buy shiny baubles and beautiful clothes to distract people from the heartache that cloaks us.

One of the costs of privilege is the way it masks our longing for wholeness. It helps us to hide from ourselves. It tells us we are not troubled. We are not in need of healing. It erases our histories of abuse and trauma. It hides our wounds and broken hearts. It distracts us with shiny objects.

No matter how much something sparkles, it doesn't provide a path toward healing. No matter how much something shimmers, it doesn't fill our spirits. Not really.

Jesus' words to the disciples are meant to break down the barriers that they have erected between themselves and the hungry crowds. He is reminding them that though they are great workers and devoted followers and longing to be in service to God, God is most interested in seeing the parts of themselves they would rather keep hidden. God is not keeping a score card of all the work they have done, but God is waiting to provide comfort and care and compassion should they be in need. You may have material wealth, but that is not why God loves you. You may be admired by others, but that is not why God loves you.

If all you are is rich? There is nothing God can do for you.

If all you are is full? There is no need for God to feed you.

If all you can do is laugh? There is nothing for God to listen to.

This teaching is radical in that we are taught through experience that what the world out there expects is whole, healed people who have it all figured out. We are a meritocracy that awards excellence and perseverance and pushing through instead of falling apart. When someone is grieving and able to hide it, to return to work sooner than anyone expected, we say, "You're so brave. You're so strong." When someone is hungry and denies themselves food we say, "You look so good. You have such willpower."

God is more interested in our authentic selves, including the parts that feel broken, the parts that struggle to be vulnerable, the grief that we carry with us our whole life through. God desires a relationship with Creation that is based on comfort, healing, and feeding.

These Blessings and Woes are a message of hope, a call of who to care for, but also a message for each of them. How were these disciples allowing God to see them? Were they one

of the crowd, able to admit their troubles, or would they keep themselves separate and closed off - closed off from the vulnerability of being known by God, of being known by each other?

Jesus' teaching was two-fold, yes care for the poor and feed the hungry and comfort those who weep. But also, remember that you are poor and hungry and weep, lest you hide yourself from God, lest you become so consumed with what others think about you that you hide away the part of your spirit that needs healing and instead it festers and oozes and leaks out. Lest you disguise your hunger pains by talking louder and louder until you become too weak with hunger to continue. Lest your laughter has that hard edge where it suddenly cracks and bursts into weeping.

There will be a time when the shine will wear off. When the guard will be let down. You think you are rich, but you will realize that money did not buy you love. You think you are full, but one day you will be hungry. You are laughing now, but one day you will mourn and weep. When that day comes, God will be waiting. To comfort you. To feed you. To console you.

The Blessings remind us that yes, God loves those people out there that the world has kept separate, that we try to hide away. God loves those people. And God loves us, too, no matter what pain we are carrying, no matter how messy our house is, whether we are successful or struggling, whether we are laughing or weeping.

There is a practice we have culturally where we talk about being blessed. We say things like "I have been given so many blessings." Or "I am truly blessed." That may be true, but in the narrative of faith, that is only part of the story. Jesus teaches that the blessings come out of the hardest parts of our life - the ways in which we are poor or do not measure up, the things we hunger for, the grief that causes us to weep. Blessings are the result of naming the ways we have been broken by life's circumstances. Sometimes that blessing will be in the form of a safe and

secure home when we once knew homelessness. Sometimes that blessing will be food security when once we were hungry. Sometimes that blessing will be joy that is woven together with our grief.

And sometimes that blessing is just knowing that we are not alone. We are not the only ones who have struggled or are struggling. We are not the only ones with a hunger so deep it feels like we will never be full. We are not the only ones who walk around this world with both a smile on our face and an aching heart. We are not alone. God is with us. Jesus is with us. The crowds are with us and we are with the crowds.

Jesus teaches about a world in which there is no separation. There is no poor or rich. There is no hungry or full. There is no weeping or laughing. There are only people, fully human, brokenness on display so that they might heal each other, be with each other, be known fully and completely by each other. May we take the risk of being seen, of being known, by God and each other. May we take the risk of being Blessed. Amen.