

## ***Blessings & Woes***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC  
February 24, 2019 – 7th Sunday after Epiphany  
Text: Luke 6:17-26

Have you ever had one of those days when you felt like all the forces of the universe were arrayed against you? One of those times when stuff just keeps happening, almost as if someone is trying to throw you off your game in some cosmic sort of way? It can start out enough innocently enough. The slacks you had planned on wearing suddenly can't be worn because the waist button comes off in your hand. Then, you spend so much time finding something else to wear that you don't have time to eat breakfast or make lunch so you run out the door, already late, thinking, "I'll just grab a bite somewhere." But then, your day ends up filled with unexpected problems and situations demanding your time and energy and before you know it, the clock says 4pm and your stomach is incredibly upset because you realize you've had a whole lot of coffee but no real food.

At last, you're on your way home when you run into a huge traffic jam you hadn't counted on and you are suddenly very sorry you didn't take the time to fill up the gas tank. So, you're stuck on 95 watching the gas needle drop ever lower. You make it home, after stopping at the gas station with the funky gas pump, only to find out the dog had been too long without a walk so there are

now some very unpleasant stains needing your immediate attention that no one else in your household seemed to notice. Meanwhile, everyone is hungry, including the dog, and no one is very enthusiastic about the plan you had for dinner. At last, everyone is fed, including the dog, and you can finally relax and watch your favorite tv show. You settle in to your preferred corner of the couch, remote in hand – the one you just had to put batteries into – press the appropriate buttons only to discover some kind of ridiculous basketball – hockey -- something all-star game, meaning that momentary virtual escape into the British countryside is not going to happen. After silently screaming into the nearest couch pillow, you sigh, turn on MASH reruns yet again, and hope with all your might that tomorrow will be better.

Does any of this strike a chord with anyone or is it just me who has had a bad day like this? (*pause*) Of course! We all have bad days. And some days are just really awful – much worse than the litany of petty woes I just rattled off. Some days contain unbearable heartbreak like losing a loved one or receiving a lay-off notice or acknowledging a relationship shattered beyond repair. The pain in these moments is crushing, quite literally crushing. You feel like you can't move, you can't think, you can't function. But you have to, somehow, because life goes on. Even when we feel like it possibly can't, it does, and, ready or not, each day takes us along with it. All we can do is hang on and hope we can make it

through until we find space and time to breathe once more, to find our feet once again and move on.

We've all had these moments, haven't we? Those moments when we don't know how we'll move forward yet knowing we have to. In these moments we are desperate for hope. We need to know there is something out there bigger than our pain and stronger than our fears. These are the moments when we need – God. We need to know that this life, this crazy, painful heartbreaking life, is not all there is. There has to be more. There has to be light at the end of the tunnel. Quite simply these are the moments when we know just how much it is that we need God.

That's the context behind the story we read this morning from Luke's Gospel. Luke's telling of this story describes the people gathered to hear Jesus, to see Jesus, to experience Jesus because they were desperate for a word of hope, for some reassurance that God knew how hard their lives were, and that God cared. This is the reality into which Jesus spoke these words:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account [of me].”

Can you imagine how these words felt like cool water on a hot day, gently splashing on all those sweaty, aching bodies? Can you feel

that little spark of hope rekindling in their souls, and yours, once again? These were beautiful, incredible, life-transforming words offered to a desperate crowd by a man with a voice so gentle and yet so powerful it carried over the crowd. Surely, he was speaking to each person individually. Surely here was a man connected to God in an extraordinary way.

These words touched the hearts of the people who had come from miles around to hear and see Jesus. These words from Luke echo similar words in the Gospel of Matthew which are much better known. Taken from what is known as the sermon on the mount in Matthew, the Beatitudes are more detailed than the list in Luke:

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

Blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

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

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

It's almost as though Matthew provides some details to a sketchy outline of the same ideas that Luke offers. Scholars don't agree if

this is one incident reported on differently by the two Gospel writers or if these ideas were so central to Jesus' whole message that Luke's account is of an entirely different moment with a similar emphasis – that the poor and the suffering, the hungry and the reviled – are still beloved of God, still deserving of care and compassion. There is much merit to this argument, I think. Both of these lists contain the central teaching of Jesus – to love the other as much as you love yourself even as you love God with all that you are and all that you have.

What's truly fascinating about these two different texts is that in Matthew, the focus remains only on the positive. Matthew goes into great detail listing off all the blessings God has in store for those who are struggling in life each day – the poor in spirit, the hungry, the meek and so on. Matthew stays with the positives, emphasizing that in spite of whatever struggle you are experiencing in the moment, God is with you. Luke, however takes it to the next level in a very visible way. Luke lists fewer of the situations which will lead to blessings from God – poverty, hunger, sadness and the reality of being reviled – but then he continues on. He actually goes there, listing off what will bring woe to people. And Luke's list of what will bring woe is exactly the list we hope it would be, isn't it?

“Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.  
Who 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.”

Yikes! Harsh words but, let's be honest, we like this list of Luke's about who will suffer woe! Those rich people who have it so easy – it's not always gonna be that way! Those people who have their fill of everything every day, they'll know what it's like to be hungry and in real need some day! And you people who think life's a big joke, you're gonna know what it is to cry like I have! And all you people who think so well of yourselves, well the joke is on you because no one really likes you!

Yes, we definitely like Luke's list of woes. It dares to spell out in no uncertain terms what we think sometimes, deep inside our hearts – that all these folks who seem to have it so easy will know what it's like to suffer, like we have suffered. Those people who begrudge food for the hungry or help for the poor will know what it's like to go without. They'll know what it's like to have broken hearts and shattered dreams. They'll know what it's like to be lied to and deceived by people they trusted. That's right. That's justice. They will get what they deserve, at last.

Hmmm. But that doesn't really sound like Jesus, does it? That doesn't sound like a message about loving others as you would like to be loved, does it? No, it doesn't. So, maybe, we're

getting it wrong. Maybe Luke's list of "woes" isn't intended to make the poor and the hungry feel better because those who have it easy get theirs in the end. Maybe Jesus' blessings and woes list in Luke has an entirely different point than what it looks like on the surface. Maybe Jesus was speaking to all the people who came to hear him that day – the poor and the rich, the hungry and the well-fed, the comfortable and the sad, the anxious and the self-confident. Maybe Jesus's list of blessings is intended as a life-ring of hope tossed to the people in the crowd who felt like they were drowning, like they were being slowly ground down into nothing by the life they had to live each day. Words offering assurance of hope and well-being as possible for all would have lifted the spirits of everyone there, showing a way forward in spite of all that was conspiring to hold people back from God.

And that list of woes, maybe in stead of an indictment of people who didn't know suffering, it was a reminder of reality – that wealth never lasts so coveting it offers no real security. It was a reminder that an abundance of food and stuff is no guarantee of a good life, a meaningful life, a God-centered life. In fact, it can easily lead you away from God instead of toward God. Perhaps, these woes were a reminder that success and joy in life don't last, fame and fortune don't last, even a good reputation doesn't last. All can be gone in an instant leaving you with what when it

disappears? This is what you should be thinking about, worrying about, praying about, Jesus says.

In Luke's listing of blessing and woes spelled out by Jesus, what we really have is a roadmap to follow in our quest to live the life God intends us to live. Jesus is reminding us that life isn't perfect and that God never promised it would be. But life is always hopeful, with emerging possibilities even in the midst of the darkest moments. Jesus is reminding us that we are to live a life that isn't selfish. Instead we are always to be on the lookout for the other, especially when the other needs help. If someone *needs* help and we *can* help, then we *are supposed to* help in whatever way God places before us. Supporting the local food pantry, volunteering with meals on wheels or seniors helping seniors, mentoring a teenager. There is always a way to help.

Finally, Jesus is reminding us never to get too full of ourselves. Never to think so much of ourselves that we forget that not only is life never perfect, we are never, ever perfect. We have faults. We make mistakes. We screw up regularly. We have good days and bad ones, good moments and awful ones. We are totally and completely human, fully enmeshed in the blessings and woes that life brings each day. But it's all okay because we know God loves us anyway. It's all okay because Jesus shows us the path forward beyond our mistakes and our screw-ups. We just have to admit to God and ourselves that all those mistakes and screw-ups,



all those short-comings, all those sins are there in the first place. This is, of course, the hardest part. But, as my dad always said, if it was easy, anybody could do it. And you're not everybody. You're you, uniquely wonderful, uniquely flawed you – just as God made you. And if that isn't the biggest blessing ever, I don't know what is. Amen.