

The Beatitudes

Blessed to Be A Blessing
Luke 6:17-31

A Dialogue Sermon for Two Readers
by Matt & Rachel Matthews
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Matt: When he was a boy he was always the last to be picked for teams in gym class. He wasn't particularly athletic or smart or *anything*---or, so he thought. He carried these feelings into adulthood, deep feelings of exclusion, of being on the outside looking in, of being the odd-man-out.

Rachel: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you . . ."

M: She works six nights a week. Her boss takes half of her tips. She's so used to standing up all day long that it feels odd to sit still for more than a minute in a padded chair. And she's so used to moving and to the clatter of "order up" and the clanging of the register, she feels a stranger to silence. When her son was 13-years-old he aspired to be a first baseman on a major league team. She bought him a glove that took a whole week's pay.

R: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

M: (Sung:) *"I was there to hear your burning cry, I'll be there when you are old. I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see your life unfold."*

R: I hope they can claim that.

M: (Far away, as if not fully present:) Hum?

R: Those people. I hope that boy who felt excluded and that woman who worked all day and was still poor—I hope they can claim the good news that *is* there for them, that God rejoices *because* of them.

M: Me too. I hope that, also.

R: I want the scriptures to comfort them, especially these scriptures we read today.

M: Sometimes it's difficult to hear words of comfort, especially when you've felt on the outside for so long.

R: I agree. That's why the church must always lift words like these up again and again. These verses declare God's prejudicial commitment to the poor, to the left out, and to the chronically misfit.

M: "Prejudicial commitment?"

R: God is committed to the disenfranchised. God is on the side of those people who have no one on their side. God is a fan of those who don't have a fan club, or a family, or loved ones who cheer them on. God is eager to fill up those who hunger and weep. That's good news.

M: Yes, it is.

R: Listen to what Gustavo Gutierrez says about God's commitment to the poor: "God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God's [agape] love" (*Essential Writings*, 313, Orbis Books: 1996).

M: I love your big words! God loves the poor because they are oppressed by systems of injustice often beyond their control, and they aren't able to live as God intended for all people to live. And this is true for anyone or any group who feels on the outside looking in for any reason.

R: People who are old sometimes feel left out. And teenagers sometimes feel badly misunderstood.

M: If you are in the "in-crowd" there is a danger that you may rely too much on yourself, right?

R: Right. At least that's the danger. We are prone to the idolatry of self.

M: I love your big words. So this passage is good news—but only to some of us. Some of us aren't poor--- like you and me. We are, basically, rich. And we aren't on the outside looking in. What would Jesus say about that? "*Woe unto you?!"*

R: I'm not ready to talk about the woes in this text yet, because it's not the woe that strikes me about this text. It's the blessing.

M: The blessing?

R: *Blessed are you*, says Jesus. Blessing. The world isn't good at blessing one another. We aren't good at being thankful and sharing with others and building people up. We aren't good at receiving blessing from others, much less God.

M: You're probably right about that. (But I'd better say you're right or I'll be in big trouble.)

R: God is a God of blessing. As God's people, we should follow suit.

M: We should bless others?

R: Yes, we *should* be thankful for our blessings, and we *should* bless others. And "should" is probably not the best word. It is our "calling" and "privilege."

(Quickening pace:) It's our *calling* to thank each other everyday. It's a *privilege* to encourage one another. It's an *honor* to build one another up, not put each other down. Can you imagine God on the sidelines of our life? God is hollering and clapping and laughing and rooting us on. God is there celebrating us. Isn't that a marvelous image of God?

M: Yes, I think . . .

R: God is there beaming, encouraging us at every turn . . .

M: Right, I think . . .

R: ... Do you know that one of the oldest scraps of scripture we possess is the familiar word in Numbers 6. You know what they are?

M: Something about eating clams or pork?

R: No, they are words of blessing. "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." *It's a blessing.*

M: I have that written on a coffee mug somewhere.

R: Those words were found on a piece of silver in a tomb at Ketef Hinnom, just south of Jerusalem, that dates back from about 600 BC. The biblical message is not only that God redeems us and loves us and delights in us, but that God *blesses us* as well.

M: I think that's good news.

R: Me too.

M: But I can't shake the "woe" part of this scripture. I am a rich man. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." This frightens me. I take some consolation that I'm not as rich as Jimmy Buffet, but I'm still rich by the world's standards. In terms of money, I'm richer than most of our brothers and sisters in the whole country of Cuba, for example. And, in most cases, I'm on the inside not the outside. I hold positions of privilege and power.

R: Yeah, that scripture is pretty blunt, that's for sure. From these verses we see something of the way God wants the world to look like. God wants to see a society where wealth is used for the common good. God wants to see a society where all people have a voice and where hunger and weeping do not exist. That world, one day and in God's time, *will* exist.

M: But until that time?

R: Until that time, we can work to make it happen. And we who are rich can remember to share. We can remember that our comforts must not distract us from serving and loving God.

M: I can do those things. Or I can try. *I do try.* I'm aware, however, that I fail. My comforts often *do* distract me from loving and serving God.

R: Woe onto you, then.

M: That's no comfort. (And woe unto you *too*, by the way.)

R: A word of woe is a comfort if it leads us to change, to turning around towards God.

M: Like old Zacchaeus. He was rich, but he changed his ways. And he became a blessing to others.

R: Right, a blessing. That's the key, I think. The God who judges you and me and everybody else who is rich or in a position of privilege is a God well acquainted with *blessing*.

M: So, maybe there's hope for a sinner like me?

R: Yes, there *is* hope for you and me and the whole world. And not only is there hope, there is here in this text an invitation. An invitation to join in showering others with the blessing and good news of God's love.

Try to imagine being on the sidelines of somebody's life. You're rooting them on. You can do that. God calls us all to do that.

M: I can do that?

R: Of course you can.

M: Right. Here I am standing on the sidelines of somebody's life. Cheering them on. We CAN build people up. We can compliment people. We can say please and thank you. We can volunteer at DREAM House. We can give flowers for no reason. We can give our time to SAFE House. We can take the time to listen to others. We can . . .

R: (Interrupting with song:) "I was there to hear your bawling cry, I'll be there when you are old. I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see your life unfold."

M: (Reflective:) On the sidelines cheering us on . . . That's really quite a powerful point you're making. Or, singing. Amazing, really.

R: Yes it is.

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M: (After big pause:) When he was a boy he was always the last to be picked for teams in gym class. He wasn't particularly athletic or smart or *anything*---or, so he thought. He carried these feelings into adulthood, deep feelings of exclusion, of being on the outside looking in, of being the odd-man-out.

R: And he joined our church. And we loved him for many reasons, not the least of which was that he was a gift to us from God. He came to church cleanup days; he did good work. The other men joked with him and they invited him to poker nights. He wasn't a good singer, but he liked singing, and the longer he came to worship the more freely he sang. One day, the elderly lady who sat in front of him turned around after the benediction and said that his voice was strong and it reminded her of her late husband's voice. And she had tears in her eyes that trickled down hopeful cheeks. He was blessed by this community of crusty saints, even as they often said that *he* was a blessing to *them*.

M: And the woman who worked all day and was still poor? What about her?

R: She lives down the street in the house Old Mister Cherry rents out. Early on Saturday mornings, she wanders around to yard sales in her neighborhood. She gives her neighbors hot pie pans of buttered cinnamon toast crusted thick with sugar and cinnamon. Her neighbors have gotten used to this. She uses any excuse to bring little gifts to them.

They would allow her to pick anything from their yard sales; she would be welcome to have anything from the tables of stuff they are trying to sell. She always peruses the objects on the tables, the lamps, the chipped dishes, the old happy meal toys.

"I couldn't take a thing," she says every time. "I already have more than I can use."

Whenever she finds a baseball, or a bat, or a glove, she tells the story of the glove she bought for her now grown son. He was going to play first base in the majors. He works in a pickle plant. The closest he got to the major leagues was playing right field for the company fast-pitch softball team. To her, he is her major league player.

At one of the neighborhood yard sales, she eyed a stuffed armchair upholstered with big, red flowers.

Take the chair, her neighbor said.

No, she said. And as she began her little speech about how she couldn't take a thing because she already has more than she can use, the man and his three teenage sons gently eased her into the chair. She flopped in, settled herself, grabbed the arms, and sighed. And before she could say that she wasn't one for sitting very still for very long, they picked up the chair with her in it and carried her right down the middle of the street to her house while neighbors clapped and cheered. She joined in the fun and began waving to them like the queen of Sheba.

M: This is a fairy tale.

R: No. No, it's not a fairy tale. It's what I imagine the kingdom of God looks like. And it is our privilege to help to build it. We can do it, because the ancient one whom the people once sought is still in our midst. Those who are troubled still seek him. And by the Spirit's power, the Risen Christ is still full of healing and power, and of possibility and of hope, and of peace and of grace, forever . . .

M: . . . and ever.

R: Amen.

M: And amen.

Luke 6:17-31 (NRSV)

17 He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. 18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

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

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

22 “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you^[a] on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

24 “But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

25 “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.

26 “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

27 “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.