**Blessings and Woes for the Common Good**

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Luke 6: 17-26 Russell Mitchell-Walker

A student went to a retreat at which an exercise was to chart the emotional peaks and valleys in your life. The next task was to locate in your life when you were closest to God. Lo and behold, those times were in the troughs. God was closest when one was broken, and sad, and outside of it. Has this been your experience? As people of faith, we draw on God, on others, on prayer, when we most need it, in the toughest times of our lives. Heather Balfour named this in her faith story a few weeks ago, including that God was with and in the people who supported her.

This may be what Jesus was talking about in the blessings in Luke today. The blessing may not be so much something that is coming or will happen in the future but the way God is present with us in our faith, here and now. In sharing these blessings and woes, Jesus is taking another step toward his mission that Luke has been sharing in the previous chapters. In Luke 4, Jesus declared the beginning of his ministry through reading from Isaiah 61, proclaiming that “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” This is the year of Jubilee, where all debts are forgiven every 50 years so everyone can have a fresh start. Wouldn’t that be something! This is the kind of community Jesus is calling the community to live out. So, when he proclaims the woes to those who are rich or full, he is calling them to this new community, to wake up, turn from the system that benefits the few, and become part of creating a community that benefits all, where there is enough for all.

While Jesus has turned to his disciples, to those who have committed to following him, to say these things, the multitudes are there to hear as well. It is a message for everyone. For us it is helpful to know that in the context of the social culture of the time, it is a better description to understand the rich and poor as greedy and socially unfortunate. [John J. Pilch](https://liturgy.sluhostedsites.org/6OrdC021322/theword_cultural.html) of John Hopkins University describes it as

“important to remember that the word “poor” in biblical culture describes a social reality rather than an economic one. In this cultural context, the labels “rich” and “poor” take on a meaning quite different than in our culture. In antiquity a person became rich because that individual had power to take wealth from those who were weaker and unable to defend themselves. While in the modern Western world, wealth itself bestows power, in the ancient Mediterranean world power was the means for acquiring wealth.”

Those who have wealth taken from them, widows, orphans, the poor, are powerless and vulnerable. So, it is culturally more appropriate to think of rich and poor as greedy and socially unfortunate. The woes then, as a challenge to the greedy to change their ways, is calling them to wake up to a new or another possibility of living or be separated from God. They and we, are called to be more like Zaccheus, the tax collector who changed after meeting Jesus and paid back everyone he’d wronged, rather than Lazarus who lived in wealth and ignored the poor, only to suffer after death. It is about being attentive and generous toward our neighbours, as God is attentive and generous with us.

This is largely a call to community values, upholding the common good. These are kingdom values which are often in opposition or a challenge to worldly values. In the kingdom, the shalom community, the blessings that Jesus proclaims, the care of all in community comes first, before individual freedoms or values. Individual rights as we seem to be so focused on these days have very little to do with gospel values, with the kingdom. We are called to care for all in the community, including those who are vulnerable and make sure they are healthy and have enough. How well are we doing at this today?

As we think about Black History Month, another example of the challenge of God’s values vs worldly values is the system of racism and white privilege. As a white person, I benefit every day from cultural systems and institutions that for hundreds of years have been slanted in my favour. They are so embedded and we are so used to them that as white people, we don’t notice them without some work on our part. Having a son and now a daughter in law who are indigenous, has been one of the experiences that have opened my eyes to this privilege. Brian has witnessed how Tyler is treated differently in stores, if Brian is not walking right beside him. Last week while they were in Toronto, Jessica was refused the possibility of paying for a hotel with debit (and using her work credit card as a preauthorization), as so called hotel policy but when Tyler’s sisters’ white boyfriend offered to pay, they asked him how he would like to pay and he was allowed to pay with his Visa debit card the next morning, without any pre-authorization. The call to end racism, being seen as a move to living out God’s community of shalom, will seem like a blessing to Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, but to those of us who are non-racialized or white, it will seem like a woe. We don’t want to lose or give up our privilege. However, if I can see the cost to me of the system, and the benefit of all of us being on more equal footing, then there is blessing for all. Jesus will be about the business of transforming our language and our experience into an ultimate experience of abundance and life, a community in which all will be filled and all will know joy.

Jesus is calling us to transform our communities as well as enjoy the blessings of life and love in our present context whatever they are. Jim McCoy of the [EKKlesia Project](https://ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2019/02/feeling-the-beatitudes/) shares this story of Mary Angelou’s Aunt Tee:

Maya Angelou’s Aunt Tee worked 30 years as a maid and then 30 years as a live-in housekeeper. Once she was house-keeping for a couple in Bel Air, California, and lived with them in their fourteen-room ranch house, complete with swimming pool, three cars, and numberless palm trees. She watched her employers grow older and descend into a dry silence as they ate their evening meals of soft scrambled eggs, melba toast, and weak tea.

On Saturdays Aunt Tee would cook a pot of pig’s feet, simmer a pot of greens, fry chicken, make potato salad, and bake a banana pudding. That evening, her friends – the chauffeur from down the street, another house-keeper and her spouse – would come to Aunt Tee’s, where they would eat and drink, play records and dance. As the evening wore on, they would settle down to a card game. The weekly gathering was drenched in joy and laughter.

One Saturday night, during the card game, Aunt Tee’s employers cracked her door open and motioned for her to come into the hall. The man whispered, “Theresa, we don’t mean to disturb you, but you all seem to be having such a good time.” The woman added, “We hear you and your friends laughing every Saturday night, and we’d just like to watch you. We don’t want to bother you. We’ll be quiet and just watch.” The man said, “If you’ll just leave your door ajar, your friends don’t need to know. We’ll never make a sound.”

McCoy reflects: “The blessing of God is the gift of the fullness and flourishing of life that scripture calls shalom, the gift of being drawn into God’s life and work. God’s blessing is not a static gift, but rather sets in motion cycles of gift-giving and receiving.”

May we see the woe’s in this passage as opportunity to wake up to God’s call to work toward a community where all have enough, celebrating God’s abundance. May we embrace the blessings of God, in all of our contexts as we seek to be faithful to the gospel and seek the common good. May we experience God’s love and blessings in the love and support in community, in one another.