



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
13 February 2022
Sermon: Blessings and Woes
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Luke 6:17-27

Luke 6:17-27 New Revised Standard Version

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 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.

If I hadn't been there; if I hadn't seen it for myself, I would have thought this place, this thing, could not really exist. Thousand, not hundreds, but thousands of scholars of religion, seminary professors, wide-eyed graduate students, Bible nerds, pastors, priests, rabbis, imams, monks, seekers, and curious on-lookers from across the world flock annually to the AAR/SBL, the annual concurrent meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature. From diehard radicals to the conscientious orthodox, along with everyone in-between, and also all those who eschew such binaries or belief systems come together to share their research, to hear new ideas, to promote their newest book, and to network, network, network. AAR is often the place of job interviews for academic positions. It's also where authors try to sell their book ideas to academic editors and publishers, and where prospective grad students might try to shake hands with a future mentor or doctoral advisor, just to make sure they are seen, to make sure they are more than just a name on a page in piles after piles of applications.

One might, naively, believe, having spent some time growing up in church or, perhaps having some periphery experience with a seminary, that such a gathering would be friendly, cordial, the free sharing of ideas, a place of mutual regard and support. And at its best, this is true of AAR, and then at other times, well - All the hierarchies, the prejudices, our exclusionary 'isms' show up too. There's always a question-and-answer period following a scholarly presentation, and these Q&A sections are notorious opportunities for grandstanding. You know what I'm talking about, when someone asks you a question, but the question is really just a soliloquy about why you are wrong. This is why I appreciate that we always have music instead after sermons.

And, yes, you are probably rightly assuming that this thing, this conference, intimidated the bejesus out of me in my grad school days. I mean, I loved it, and I hated it, and still to this day, I love to hate it; I hate to love it. The research presented and the people presenting there can be so wonderful at times, so heart and eye-opening, and yet, it's all packaged in

this event that feels cooperate and capitalized. It's so interesting, so troubling, yet also utterly predictable, that the study of religion, even the study of something like our reading today from Luke, the Sermon on the Plain, could become commodified, ranked and stratified. Can you imagine the books and papers written on 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."

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

"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."

There's an irony here, that the competitive, hierarchal world of scholarship can shed so much ink and paper on words like these, words that describe the God of Jesus Christ, the divine who, our passage says, eschews our world's hierarchies, and flips the tables of the money changers.

I'm in the middle right now of a wonderful book on vocation by three leaders of FTE, the Forum for Theological Education, Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker¹. FTE is an organization that mentors, equips, and funds future leaders of the church and academy, with particular attention to those coming from communities historically pushed to the margins. Early in the book, Matthew Wesley Williams describes an experience with the American Academy of Religion, during a time of vocational confusion when he was a student. Williams felt called to religious service but not really into either the academy or the church. And then at AAR he felt all the weight that I've described

¹ Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker, *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2020). The following quotes are from pp. 25-28. Italics added.

to you, but it was compounded and made all the more intimidating by his being a young Black man in the primarily white institution that is the academy.

I rushed onward with an inner whirlwind of questions: What's next for me? How do I get a read on what I am really called to do and be in the world? Will I live up to the expectations of my parents, professors, and mentors? What mentors should I model? What will be my next most faithful step in figuring out what I will do with my life in light of my sense of purpose, passion, and call?

Do these questions sound familiar to you? Are you asking yourself these questions? With so much changing so quickly, with so much unknown, are you asking yourself these days about your next most faithful step? And if you're not, perhaps, then, the question is, why not?

With such questions pursuing and surrounding him, Williams walked the streets of Atlanta, where AAR was held that year, as students, teachers, and practitioners raced around him from one conference room or meeting to the next.

He continues, There he sat, legs dangling on a half wall in front of the hotel, head slightly cocked to the right, still and silent, seemingly looking off into the distance. I burst into his quietude, excited to find him alone and potentially available to dispense some advice. 'Dr. Harding!' I called out as I approached him.

Williams had stumbled upon the great scholar and activist Vincent G. Harding, known for his ground breaking scholarship on the life and theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Williams continues, I explained my vocational dilemma. Then I added, 'And I know Howard Thurman was a friend and mentor to you. He has been a major spiritual mentor for me as I have been trying to figure this out. Is there any advice you can give me?'

'Matthew,' [Harding] responded slowly, signaling that he now knew me by name. 'Stick with Howard.' He took a deep breath and after a seemingly endless pause he continued, 'He'll help you.'

And that was the end of their interaction. Williams was stunned. That was it? *'Stick with Howard.'* That's the sage advice from the great Vincent Harding? *'Stick with Howard Thurman'?*

But it was enough. In fact, so much more than enough. It was a revolution, a turning point in Matthew Wesley Williams' life, those three words, "Stick with Howard." It is hard for me to convey their importance to you now. You have to know about the person he was talking about. Howard Thurman was also a pillar, in fact, one of the foundational figures of Black spirituality and theology in the 20th Century. But, not in the way one would expect. He wasn't known for his scholarly output or larger than life speeches and sermons. He was, in fact, a quiet figure. He would talk slowly. His students joked sometimes, that, if you heard Howard Thurman speak, he would take such long pauses to let the words sink in, that you'd wonder if he had fallen asleep in the middle of a sentence. But that was deeply purposeful.

What I am staying is that, in his constant quest for the living and liberating God, in his devotion to prayer, and protest, and spiritual practice, Howard Thurman was a figure who stood in contrast to the busy, hierarchical, commodified world that was surrounding Williams and Harding that day, on the busy streets of Atlanta, in the AAR and even the church. Harding, the tried-and-true activist and scholar, was telling Williams, in his youth, to stay grounded in his devotional life, to keep searching for God, to keep searching for "what makes you come along...Because what the world needs is people who have come alive," as Howard Thurman himself is famous for saying.²

And that, I believe, is exactly what Jesus is telling us today, on this ordination Sunday, in our lectionary text in the Gospel of Luke: keep on in your quest for the living and liberating God.

For, "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."

² Qtd. in Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker, *Another Way*, p. 57-58.

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

“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.”

First and foremost, these words tell us about God, about who the God of Jesus Christ is: God of those pushed to the margins, God of those who weep, God of those who hunger. God who appears and makes community in the corners, on the streets, in places of liberation and empowerment, rather than among the comfortable and the grandstanders.

And second, these words tell us something about our vocation today, about the life we are called to pursue, the life that may truly be called blessed. It is not one of riches and satisfactions, not one of titles and checkboxes. It's not a bucket-list. It's not a trophy, a life-time achievement award. It is a life caught up in the love of God and God's people.

The pursuit of career, of reputation, of safeguards or nest eggs, these are not bad in themselves. This text is not meant to make you feel bad for pursuing them. But it is meant to raise the question for you, what is the ground of your life? What are you truly pursuing? Do these pursuits bring you closer or take you farther away from the Spirit of the living God, the Spirit of community and creativity, the love of self and neighbor?

Friends, on this ordination Sunday, when the church recognizes that we are all called to lives of love and discipleship, we affirm that God calls you, calls each of you, and calls us together as a collective, as the people of God: to love; to make room in your life for love; and to drop, or perhaps simply loosen your hold on the things in your life that no longer draw you closer to love. For the Spirit calls. The Spirit is calling you. Toward life abundant. Toward Beloved community. Toward expansiveness, creativity, and service. Toward moments of stopping, and breathing, and just basking in the great gift that is life. That is our call. That is our vocation. May we never tire of following the Spirit where she leads. Amen.