

Have you ever been lost? Perhaps on a hike in the wilderness, in an unfamiliar city or maybe in a large parking lot? Whenever I park my car, especially in a large parking lot, I try to look for a landmark, for something stationery and distinctive that will help me easily locate my car when I return. A landmark often provides a sense of orientation, a way to find one's bearings.

And so it is with our faith journeys as well. We need landmarks - reliable points of orientation - and the teachings of Jesus that we find in Luke this morning are just such landmarks. They orient us to paths that are blessed of God... and other paths that are not.

Blessed are you who are poor...

Blessed are you who hunger now...

Blessed are you who weep now...

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man...

Conventional wisdom, especially that espoused by our culture, would not hear these conditions as blessings. As a matter of fact, if you are poor, hungry, sorrowing, or wronged, then your life would not be blessed. In less charitable moments some might even say you are cursed... like the friends of Job said to him. Jesus' beatitudes disorient conventional wisdom with God's unconventional ways. And this is made abundantly clear in our Lukan version of the Beatitudes.

The woes are startling as they are paired as opposites to the blessings: poor and rich, hungry and full, weeping and laughing, hated and spoken well of. The woes are direct and in your face:

Woe to you who are rich...

Woe to you who are full now...

Woe to you who are laughing now...

Woe to you when all speak well of you...

Woe to you... How terrible it will be for those like this! Yet, who doesn't want to be well-off, well-fed, well-spirited, and well-liked? Who doesn't want to agree with the message espoused by our culture that says if you are rich, full, able to laugh and spoken well of then you are blessed? Blessed with abundance and ease. Blessed by God? [Pause]

Did you know that if there were but 100 people on the earth only one would have a computer! How many of us are the one? I know I am and I not only have one computer, but I have three, two desktops, one at home and one here at the church, and one laptop! Did you know that if there were but 100 people on earth only one would have a college education? How many of us are the one? Once again, I am and

I have two college degrees, a Bachelors and a Masters! If you have loose change in your pocket or purse and a bank account, then you are wealthier than most of the world's population. How many of us qualify? I know I do.

Blessed are the poor... woe to the rich

Blessed are the hungry... woe to the well-fed

Blessed are the weeping... woe to the laughing

Blessed are the hated... woe to the well liked

I don't know about you, but these woes are unsettling to me. They pierce any presumptions I might have about being blessed by God. Their direct correlation to my life make them hard to ignore. They speak directly to us as middle class American Christians whose life styles are abundantly rich by world standards. We are rich and well-fed. Laughter is often in our midst and we are spoken well of... well most of us!

So these beatitudes and woes disorient before they orient. Jesus' message disorients our presumptions about what points to our well-being with God. Looking on the outside only... a nice home with a well-stocked pantry, a regular church attendee who gives of his or her time and talents, financially set with a good reputation... all these things do not automatically qualify anyone as right with God. Just as poverty and hunger, sorrow and ill repute doesn't automatically disqualify anyone as right with God. The beatitudes remind us that we cannot go on appearances alone to prove or disprove God's favor.

A child born in Africa to parents with AIDS is no less in God's favor than a child born to parents of substantial wealth in Newport Beach. The beatitudes, so to speak, level the playing field or even tilt the playing field towards the poor and hungry. Gustavo Gutierrez, the liberation theologian, comments that "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."

God loves all of humanity. It's just that the poor are often driven to turn to God for their hope... they know that they cannot provide for themselves. They know that they need hope beyond their own circumstances and the words of Isaiah hold this promise, "God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and to comfort all who mourn." The words of Jesus hold this promise:

Blessed are you who are poor...

Blessed are you who hunger now...

Blessed are you who weep now...

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man...

These remind us that it is in God that we hope, not in our present circumstances for God doesn't rely on outward appearances to reveal who is blessed and who is not. These remind us that God holds those who traverse such difficult terrain in special favor. And in this hope I hear the words of Edward Dobson. He writes in the introduction to a book of devotions, "Hi. My name is Ed, and I have ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). I thought that if I ever got a terminal illness, it would force me to pray and read the Bible more. When I was diagnosed, at the age of 50, I found the opposite to be true: I could barely pray or read the Bible. It took every ounce of energy I had to get out of bed and face another day. These prayers and reflections are for those who feel the same way. I have included a short prayer for every morning and a devotional for every evening. These prayers and devotions have helped me cultivate hope in the midst of the darkness of this disease. I pray that they will do the same for you." God holds those who traverse such difficult terrain in special favor. God holds Ed with special favor.

In Ed's opening prayer he writes, "We know that every day is a gift from God, but we often take that gift for granted... All human beings know their days are numbered, but very few ever give it any thought. Most people live every day as if they had an unlimited number of days ahead of them." Yes, something about our human ability to provide for ourselves... I just landed a great job, I got all A's this report card, I secured my retirement with solid investments, I successfully run a business, I just got accepted to the university of my choice. I purchased a beautiful home, and the "I, I, I, I" list could go on and on such that our pride blocks our openness to God's involvement in such things. Life is a gift, yet we take it for granted. Maybe this is why we need hear these in your face words, this wake up call from Jesus:

Woe to you who are rich...

Woe to you who are full now...

Woe to you who are laughing now...

Woe to you when all speak well of you...

Woe to you and me when we forget to give thanks to God for the very gift of our lives. Woe to you and me when we take credit for our gifts and talents, for our homes and bank accounts, for our health and well being, for all that we have. Woe to you and me when we think we are better than others because of what we have. Woe to you and me when we forget that God is the source of all our blessings.

Imagine if you only had in your life that which you thanked God for? What would you have? What have you thanked God for lately?

In these blessings and woes, I hear the echo of God's words from Jeremiah, "You are blessed to be a blessing." Jesus seeks change through these piercing words, even among respectable churchgoers like us. Jesus seeks change, because our spiritual maturity comes in the form of radical trust in God, not in our trust of our riches, our full bellies, our happiness or good reputation.

Our spiritual maturity comes in the form of radical trust in God... The poor and hungry, the weeping and persecuted seem to know this better than the rich and full, the happy and spoken well of. Ed knows this for he wrote, "I know that ultimately my medical condition is in the hands of the Great Physician. The odds may be overwhelming. But one word from God and all of the effects of this disease can be reversed. But even if God chooses not to speak the word, I will still love and trust him."

Ed radically trusts God. And in this Ed is blessed to be a blessing. And we too are challenged to live this very same way no matter how many days we have left. Orientation blessing begins when we begin to radically trust God. Let it be so for all of us. Amen.