

## **A SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION**

*a sermon by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on February 13, 2022*

*based on Luke 6:17-26*

According to Luke, Jesus had spent the whole night in prayer. Come morning he found himself surrounded by people. Some were already sold on him; some were still making up their minds. All of them had heard of his power and how all you had to do was get near him and the demons would fly out of you.

If you had a fever he could make it go away, they said, and if your leg didn't work he could fix it. Some said he could even help your business. There was a story we looked into last Sunday about Peter and Andrew taking him out in their boat and they caught more fish than they'd ever seen.

So everyone was crowding in on him. He didn't seem to mind. It wore on him but he gave himself to them anyway. Then he sat down and asked them to sit, too. He had something he wanted to say to them. What came out of his mouth were those things scholars call Beatitudes.

It was a common enough form. People had heard them all their lives. A simple two-part thing, summing up common knowledge about how to live the best life. In their most generic form they go something like this:

“Blessed are you who have 401ks; you won't go hungry in your later years.

Blessed are you who floss, for you shall keep your teeth. . . . That kind of thing.

So, the form of what Jesus was saying was familiar to them. But the *content* Jesus used to fill this familiar form rocked them – it blew them away.

He said, “Blessed are you who are poor ?

Blessed are you who are hungry

Blessed are you who weep now

Blessed are you when people hate you, or revile you or exclude you . . . “

Hearing this was like being handed a glass of lemonade on a summer's day, sipping it and finding that it was really vinegar. It was a shocking substitution of bad things for good.

Blessedness, according to Jesus, was equated with those things people were doing their best to avoid: poverty, hunger, grief. And in every case Jesus made those equations stronger by tacking on a reversal of fortune:

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

Blessed are you who are hungry now -- for you shall be filled.

Matthew's gospel also contains this form, but Luke adds to the beatitudes a few "woe-itudes." These were mirror images of the beatitudes, in which woe is equated with what people do their best to achieve: wealth, food, laughter, esteem.

So, in the same way Jesus had first made the bad things sound good, now he makes the good things sound bad. But, you know, since you and I are so used to hearing these sayings the surprise and the edge they had originally is missing. We can't hear it.

Had he said: "Blessed are you who have cancer for you shall be made whole," or, "Blessed are you whose prayers are not answered for you shall one day see God face to face," and on the flip side, said, "Woe to you who drive a turbocharged sports car for you shall one day walk on foot" or, "Woe to you with college degrees, for you have already received your reward," we'd get it. We'd get the edge.

Of course the impact of these woes and blessings has everything to do with how your life is going. If you're hungry, this Jesus stuff sounds pretty good. If you are used to eating steak or sushi, it's a different ballgame.

So what I'm saying is that when we hear such "good news" we normally file it with all that other nice Christian advice that no one we know personally will ever follow.

But what I want you to know is that these sayings have nothing whatever to do with advice. Jesus is NOT telling people what he thinks they should do. I mean, look, when Jesus gives advice it's hard to miss.

He says stuff like, "don't waste time worrying; look at the lilies of the field. . . .

Love your enemies, bless those who curse you. THAT'S ALL ADVICE.

The beatitudes are not advice. In the Beatitudes Jesus is just describing different kinds of people hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves. And then he makes a promise to all of them that the way things are now, in the present, will not be the way things will *always* be. Let me make that clear, because this is the heart of his message.

Life, according to Jesus, is like the medieval symbol of life as a cycle, a great WHEEL OF FORTUNE. It just keeps moving around and around. Jesus' point is simply that those at the top of the wheel, those with the wind blowing in their hair, with things going really well for them, they will eventually have their turn at the bottom.

And those at the bottom, in the mud and the mire, will one day fly with the eagles. They may not think so. Being at the bottom is debilitating, but things can change even when you are there in the pit.

So, again, his teaching is not ADVICE. It is not even JUDGEMENT! It is simply the truth about life, produced by someone who empathizes with everyone, no matter where they find themselves on the great wheel.

What trips us up about this is the blessing and woe language. Whenever we hear words like blessing and woe, we automatically think: REWARD and PUNISHMENT.

And we think, "Gee, Jesus would say that something's wrong with us if we aren't on the bottom." That's not the case.

Barbara Brown Taylor who put me on to this idea that Jesus is not Ann Landers has said, "The beatitudes do not tell us what to do. They tell us who we are, and more importantly, they tell us who Jesus is."

If someone had come out to hear Jesus because they thought he was a winning ticket in the lottery, they should go home. What he had to say would not help them get on top of life's wheel or stay on top forever.

But, ironically, there are plenty of churches with a thousand members or more where they will tell you Jesus wants you to be in top of the wheel and will keep you there always ... which, of course, is why they have a thousand members and we are ... what we are.

Seriously, no one gets to stay on top of the wheel forever. Everything that goes around, comes around, as my grandmother used to say. Now, again this is not advice; it's not judgment. IT'S JUST THE WAY THINGS ARE.

Of course, and this is important, it does offer hope to those on the bottom.

Anna Kamienska has written a wonderful poem for those on the bottom called, "Those Who Carry."

Those who carry grand pianos  
To the tenth floor wardrobes and coffins  
The old man with a bundle of wood hobbling beyond the horizon  
The woman with a hump of nettles  
The lunatic pushing her baby carriage  
Full of empty vodka bottles  
They all will be raised up  
Like a seagull feather like a dry leaf  
Like eggshell scraps of newspaper

Blessed are those who carry  
For they will be raised.

This poem echoes for me a defining moment of my life. One year during my time in theological seminary, I took a job as furniture delivery man in Marin County, CA. It was hard work. But the day that was most defining for me was a day when we went into San Francisco to deliver a hide-a-bed.

We took it in to an apartment in a project somewhere and, of course the apartment was on the top floor and there was no elevator. We had to carry this hide-a-bed (made of iron) up the fire escape, four floors. I was on the bottom.

When we got to the outside door on the top floor the words, “Kill Whitey” were spray painted on the wall. They live in my memory. I remember thinking, “Well, I can only go up from this moment.”

*Blessed are those who carry grand pianos to the tenth floor, for they will be raised.*

I was never a stranger to hard manual labor growing up. In fact, it got to be kind of an issue for me when I got to high school. I was always painting or roofing, or mowing lawns for money. But I had a friend named Paul who lived around the corner from me in our comfortable California middle-class .

My friend, Paul’s mother, had gone to Stanford University. His father had not and there was a feeling in their house that his mother had under-married. But Paul would fix that for them. He was going to go to Stanford. That was decided before he was born. Paul was not allowed to do manual labor. He was fine with that, actually.

He did things that didn’t occur to me to do. He spent the entire week before the SATs at home studying for them. I didn’t know that you could study for the SATs. But then I lived totally outside of his world.

Yeah, my parents wanted me to go to college, but that was all they said. “You’re going to go to college.” They hadn’t gone themselves, and they didn’t know the first thing about how best to get there.

So, I went to Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, a little Presbyterian school some friends of mine had gone to and loved. There was nothing special about it. It was just a generic church-related college. And it was easy to get into. You just applied and paid the tuition.

I went there at a good time. Desperate to survive, they had taken a chance and hired a very progressive new president – an executive with North American Rockwell, to run the school.

Wanting to bring the college into a new age, he found money to bring in many luminaries of the day to speak. It was a great time to be there.

Now, in a school that took anybody, I found myself, for the first time in my life, to be a top-rung student. There was little competition. Besides, I've always been a late bloomer. My teachers wanted me to be in their classes. I got attention I had never gotten before. That has made all the difference for me.

So, I look back at my years of delivering iron hide-a-beds with a certain gratitude. But a person' can react in several ways to his or her past, right? Listen to this first-person story by a man from San Rafael, California.

*My father is Dutch and grew up in Indonesia when it was a Dutch colony. His family had a huge colonial-style home filled with expensive antiques and art brought over from Europe. They had cars and many valuable books.*

*My grandfather brought home orphaned tigers, bears, and monkeys to raise as pets, and my father's childhood home was always bustling and full of beauty.*

*When, during World War II, the Japanese invaded the islands, my grandfather threw the family heirlooms down the well minutes before the Japanese kicked open their door. Everything was confiscated, except for what they could fit into one suitcase apiece. The Japanese sent their Dutch captives to concentration camps, where prisoners received one cup of rice per day to eat. The women and children went to one camp, and the men to another.*

*When my father turned ten, he was sent to the men's camp, along with his best friend, who was so heartbroken at being separated from his mother that he stopped talking, drinking, and eating. When he died, the Japanese guards gave my father the contents of the dead boy's suitcase.*

*My father was able to trade these toys and clothes for an extra handful of rice a day. He was also able to get bananas from natives through the fence, and when he became weak, he traded the fruit for lighter work assignments. While others died of starvation, my father stayed alive.*

*When U.S. troops finally liberated the Dutch prisoners, my father returned to Holland with only the clothes on his back. He later immigrated to the U.S. worked his way through college, married, had three children, and bought a large house overlooking the Pacific in Southern California.*

*My father is now very old. I visited him a few years ago, while my mother was on a trip to Europe. When I opened the cupboard in his kitchen, I found rows of used Styrofoam cups, plastic "sporks," and neatly stacked fast-food French-fry boxes. A drawer was filled to the brim with corks.*

*I was emptying hundreds of corks into the garbage one day when my father came in and saw me. He flew into a panic and scooped the corks back out. "You wait," he fumed. "One day you'll need these."*

*Exasperated, I shouted, "For what?"*

*"One day, you'll need to burn the ends to make charcoal," he said. "So don't come running to me when you have nothing to write with!"*

*Thankfully I have never known absolute poverty, the loss of everything and everybody familiar; the sort of deprivation that would make someone hoard corks in a 2 million-dollar house.*

True enough. It's a hard thing to know absolute poverty. And it's such a sad thing, then, having to drag a memory like that up the wheel along with you, so that you fill a 2 million dollar house with corks.

Better than anything is to make friends with the whole wheel, knowing that when you are at the bottom, better days may be ahead, and knowing that when you're at the top, though it won't last forever, you can spend your time savoring it.

Parker Palmer, a fine spiritual teacher, defines sin essentially as the twin temptations of despair and pride. He says we are all too susceptible to falling into pride, thinking we deserve our high station in life (which may evaporate tomorrow), or of falling into despair when our luck may, in fact, change overnight. My own life has taught me that he is absolutely right.

One more story. This one is from someone in her 30s who was at the wheel's bottom and found the grace she needed there to deal with some aspects of life at the wheel's top; something that those born at the top usually can't understand.

*At 26 I wasn't prepared to be hospitalized with lymphoma, fevers coming and going, after my first round of chemotherapy. It was a week of specialists and blood draws. It was also a week of beloved friends and family taking turns sleeping on the roll out cot, helping me pass the long nights full of doubt and fear. Sometimes I was certain I would die. Other times I was sure that the fear of dying itself would overwhelm me.*

*It was June in Washington D.C. and I was stir-crazy, but my immune defenses were so low I could not leave my little germ-free room on the oncology floor. One night, I stood a single step outside the door, just to experience a different air, different sights.*

*And then one day, I was released from the hospital. I will always carry with me the intoxicating smell of that humid June day, how I could not get enough of its scent, its heat, its life. I wanted to drink the air and live for a long, long time.*

*Eight years later I am a resident doctor myself. I am sometimes confined for a very different purpose in these white hallways. Whenever someone laments the stifling summer heat outdoors, I remember that day and think what any of us would give for a small breath of precious summer air if we couldn't have it.*

Little about the going up or coming down the great wheel of life is in our control. But, you know, in the end the luckiest people are those who, over a life-time, spend some time at the bottom and some time at the top.

Still, wherever we find ourselves at a given moment, the grace of God is fully available to us and we can find a modicum of peace if we want to.

Amen