#BLESSED?
LUKE 6:20-31
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2022
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#blessed. Really? If you’re on social media at all, you’ve likely seen it. It’s pictures of a new car or a new house or a trip to that once in a lifetime destination. #blessed. It’s a post about someone’s dog or about their backstage access at the concert or even about a dinner at the impossible to access restaurant with their friends. #blessed. At times it’s an inspirational quote or a passage of scripture relating to individual encouragement. #blessed. There are over 143 million #blessed tags on Instagram alone. A lot of people out there are making claims on what it means to be blessed. For most of them, the signs of blessing involve prestige, privilege, and power. Blessed are the well-healed, the winners, and the wealthy. Blessed are the self-sufficient, the stable, the successful, and the secure. Blessed are the pretty, the popular, and the promoted. All of these are surely the signs of blessing. Right?

Jesus begins his second sermon in Luke’s Gospel talking to his disciples after coming down from the mountain where he had been praying. Jesus has just chosen twelve of his disciples to be apostles. These twelve would have special access to him. They would be his inner circle of learning and witnessing his life and ministry. So with these twelve, he came to a level place where he was surrounded by other disciples and even more people who had gathered hoping to be healed and cured, even as they sought to listen to Jesus’s teaching. Luke tells us that Jesus’s healing power was on full display among the people who had gathered from all over. In the context of Jesus’s healing work among the people, he begins his #blessed sermon.

Blessed are you all who are poor—the materially lacking, the politically powerless, the socially marginalized, the ones with no buffer of protection against the next illness or lost job or economic disruption. Picture a mother and daughter in dilapidated subsidized housing with little of the pleasures of this world surrounding them. #blessed?

Blessed are you all who are hungry now—those regularly deprived of their basic needs, the ones with bellies grumbling and bodies aching in response to deficient nutrition. Picture a veteran in the median whose cardboard begs for his next meal. #blessed?

Blessed are you all who weep now—the broken-hearted, the traumatized, the rejected, the ones who’ve lost greatly, the orphaned or widowed, the families of victims of mass casualty events. Picture a sister standing over her brother’s casket, the latest sacrifice to the god of guns in our streets. #blessed?

Blessed are you all when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of me—those belittled while standing for justice, the one mocked for being merciful, those fired for telling the truth, the uninvited and ignored and shamed for their commitments to the ways that lead to life. Picture two students at the end of the lunch table, separated from the cool kids who are all too eager to exclude those who are different. #blessed?
These beatitudes, these states of great blessing, that Jesus names are unconventional and somewhat puzzling. What is so blessed about being poor, or hungry, or mourning, or excluded? If Jesus had started the hashtag for blessed, there is no doubt it would not have trended the way it does now. Of course, the trending version of #blessed is no surprise to us. We understand that power and access to resources and being an insider are all considered good and desirable. Therefore, we conclude that those who have these things must be experiencing blessing. Then we spend a considerable amount of time and energy and resources striving to be among the “blessed.” And yet, Jesus’s teaching and ministry embodies and proclaims an alternative to the status quo estimation of who is blessed in his (and our) day. For Jesus to call these people blessed, means that they are honored and privileged in God’s way of ordering the world.

What is perhaps more startling in Jesus’s teaching is not simply that Jesus blesses and calls those blessed who the rest of the world does not. No, Jesus goes a step further by pairing each of these blessing statements with a woe statement related to those who find themselves on the other side. Woe to you all who are rich, and full, and laughing, and well-regarded. What is so wrong with these things anyway, Jesus? Don’t we pursue degrees at places like Duke to achieve these very things?

In pairing the blessings with woes, Jesus isn’t simply buying into a theology of scarcity that assumes there is not enough for everyone, so some will have to be winners and some will have to be losers. Neither is Jesus being vindictive and retaliatory toward those who the poor and powerless regard as oppressors—as if to say, “you just wait until we have control and then you’ll get what’s coming to you.” No, Jesus is speaking to something more profound, all-encompassing, and existence-altering. You see, Jesus’s woe statements put him squarely in line with prophets of old who warned God’s people and others agains not conforming to God’s ways and purposes in the world. For example, in Isaiah 5 the prophet proclaims:

Ah, you who join house to house,
    who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
    and you are left to live alone
in the midst of the land! (v. 8)

And again:
Ah, you who call evil good
    and good evil,
who put darkness for light
    and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
    and sweet for bitter!
Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes,
    and shrewd in your own sight!
Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine
    and valiant at mixing drink,
who acquit the guilty for a bribe, 
and deprive the innocent of their rights! (vv. 20-23)

The word “woe,” or in Isaiah “ah,” acts as an attention getter, a warning flag being waved. It’s a word that hooks you, like “watch out,” or “alas.” One commentator even suggested to translate the word as, “yikes.”¹ As with Isaiah, Jesus is trying to grab the attention of those who so readily and easily claim their lives to be #blessed and make them think again in light of God’s new reality that Jesus embodies, proclaims, and calls people to abide in. Watch out you who trust in your own self-sufficiency, who relish being an insider at the exclusion of others, who gorge yourself with self-gratifying privileges and the praises of people. These don’t have their end, or their goal in God’s priorities and purposes. Watch out because the things assumed to be advantages in this world are illusory—and trusting ultimately in these so-called blessings has soul-crushing outcomes both in the present and the future.

Throughout his life and ministry, through word and deed, Jesus points toward and brings into reality a new existence that God has established. Jesus proclaims and embodies a new world and a new way of being. He points to a different state of affairs where both now and in the coming future, the way the world works is redefined.² In Jesus’s life and ministry, as much as in these blessings and woes, people are put on notice that God is committed to seeing the poor, the powerless, and those without privilege raised up. Jesus doesn’t trivialize the real struggle of those who are without. And he doesn’t make a trite claim about the joy experienced by those who are not possessed by possessions (however true that claim might be). Rather, Jesus is inviting those who are listening into a new reality where the outsiders, the marginalized, the mourning, the powerless, and the needy are raised up and centered for their good and God’s glory both in the present and in the future. And to miss out on the centering and prioritizing of who God centers and prioritizes is to miss out on the blessing and the reality of God’s kingdom.

We call those who embody life according to God’s new way saints. And on this Sunday, All Saints Sunday, we remember the saints who have demonstrated what life in Jesus’s new way is like. Saints are those who have found ways both great and small to live by the values and measures of God’s reality rather than the commonly held standards of our world. Saints are those who have prioritized what and whom God prioritizes. Saints are people who value what Christ values and whose lives mirror, at least in some ways, God’s new era and existence revealed in Jesus. On this Sunday, we call to mind the communion of saints who have shaped each of us, who’ve shown us the way to Jesus, who were proclaimers of news that is truly good. These saints have relentlessly pointed toward Jesus and the reality into which he calls us. These are the folks—both dead and alive—who have inspired us, cheered us on, prayed for us, and guided us toward living more fully into the image and likeness of Jesus. Thanks be to God for these saints.

All Saints Sunday is also a day we remember that living the values of God’s way is not something reserved for the most holy or saintly among us. The invitation to sainthood, to living as holy ones, to embodying God’s ways and values in the world, is an invitation for us all. And

¹ Matt Skinner, Working preacher article  
² Joel Green, Luke Commentary, 265.
whether that invitation comes through a proclamation of blessing or a warning of woe depends a lot on where we find ourselves today. Yet regardless of how we receive the invitation, what we can trust is God’s extravagant generosity and mercy that is in the invitation. For both those who are hearing God’s ways as blessing and those who are hearing them as warning, the invitation is to new life and into a community marked by God’s purposes, promises, and provisions. Reordering and reorienting our values and purposes according to the way of Jesus is the avenue toward blessing and community.

“What are the ways of this reordered life?” Well, I’m glad you asked. Jesus calls us to a new way of life that benefits the poor and downtrodden. And Jesus tells us this way of life is marked by the character of God, who is merciful and loving, even to God’s enemies. Jesus says God’s community shows up to love enemies, to do good to those who hate them, to bless those who curse them, and to pray for those who abuse them. This community does not retaliate, but it gives freely and without expectation of reciprocation. It is wise for us to be careful here because this teaching has been used throughout history to further oppress and further marginalize those who are lowly—be that women, or enslaved people, or folks in abusive relationships. And at times, this teaching has been used to discourage the kinds of boundaries that allow people’s real needs to be addressed. Yet, we also should recognize that when a community comes together in the way Jesus describes, the needs of all are cared for, especially the needs of the most vulnerable, broken, and powerless. Unlike conventional wisdom, the wisdom of God in this community challenges us to be proximate and in relationship with each other, even when it’s hard, because there we’ll experience God’s blessing.

Let me be the first to say that living in this way is no easy calling. We know the clear and prevalent message all around us says that the powerful, the privileged, the wealthy, and the self-secure are the blessed ones. And perhaps you have experienced like I have how easy it is to get caught up chasing those very things—even when serving the Lord at a Chapel. This calling to the saintly life is filled with sinful stumblings, and yet days like today remind us to press on toward the blessed and beloved community centered on God’s character and purposes.

I want to leave you today with an image of what I imagine our role to look like as we participate in the community of Christ. A couple of weeks ago Matt Lisle, a professional baseball coach tweeted a simple question: What does a great teammate look like? And in response to this question, he included a video. The video was of a team lined up listening to an umpire speak. The umpire says, “I am here for one reason and that’s to pass out an MVP ring.” At that, one player, the catcher starts getting excited. The man continues talking, but what he has to say becomes almost irrelevant as the catcher gets more and more excited. He’s dancing up and down and turning side ways to look at his teammates. He finds the one he is looking for to his right and he starts pointing to him. He pats him on the shoulder, dances around him, points down at him and finally just stares right into the side of his face. When the man finally announces who the award goes to, the catcher slaps him on the back in congratulations. He is absolutely thrilled at the honoring of his teammate. He is blessed because his teammate is blessed. He is blessed by proximity and association.
This seems just about right for us, too. We are called to be the people in proximity to those God calls blessed, even if we are some of the very ones Jesus calls blessed. And when we are there, cheering on our siblings, we will join the communion of saints living in receiving God’s blessing in this age and in the age to come. Amen.