

“Woes and Wows!”

Neil Engle  
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Text: Luke 6:17-26

First Christian Church  
115 Courthouse Plaza  
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

It's great to have so many Boy Scouts of various ages with us this morning. I wish I could count myself among your ranks – but my scouting career progressed no further than Cub Scouts. Yet I'm familiar with the Scout Law – that a Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. I thought about that law this week when I read today's text from Luke. You see, one could almost state the Scout Law using the words Jesus used – “Blessed.” Blessed is the Scout who is trustworthy. Blessed is the Scout who is loyal. Blessed is the Scout who is helpful and so on.

Now as far as I know, no part of the Scout Law states, “Woe to the Scout who is dishonest,” or “Woe to the Scout who is mean.” Now you may have had unwritten “woe” statements as in “Woe to the Scout who misbehaves when Scoutmaster Sonny Redding is around,” but I can't find any written “woe” statements.

Our focus today is Luke's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – it's often called the Sermon on the Plain. In Matthew's account, statements of “woe” are absent. But not so in Luke. Jesus delivered the “blessings and woes” as statements of fact.

A blessing are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.  
A blessing are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.  
A blessing are you who weep now, for you will laugh.  
A blessing are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you,  
revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of man. 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.  
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.  
Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to  
the false prophets.

On the lips of members of the faith community addressing one another, a blessing is a celebration of someone's pleasant and happy circumstance, and a curse or woe is a lament over someone's plight. However, when spoken by God or by one who speaks for God, blessings and woes are more than descriptive, they are pronouncements that declare in effect that those conditions will prevail. On the lips of Jesus Christ, therefore, the blessings and the woes of our Gospel lection can be taken as the “official” proclamation of the way life will be among the people of God.

In other words, these “blessings and woes” are not suggestions on how to improve our life nor are they a list of problems to be avoided. They are simply meant to be a congratulations or a lament for the way we live our lives.

Jesus spoke of the poor, hungry, weeping and rejected as those persons most faithful to God. The poor and the hungry in Jesus' time placed their faith and trust in God for a day when justice would be served by God's intervention. Furthermore, the poor were the ones who were dependent on God and who were God's most faithful disciples. On the other hand, the rich, full, laughing, and accepted were those who were self sufficient and who were not faithful to God's call to a life of discipleship. “Congratulations,” Jesus seemed to be saying, “to all of you who have placed your trust in God but woe to you who are satisfied and content with your life.”

I don't know about you, but when I read this text, I wonder if Jesus wasn't a little confused – almost as if He's standing on His head looking at life upside down. He lifts up the poor and jabs the rich. Doesn't Jesus know that we're accustomed to looking down on the poor. The poor don't really matter, do they? Capitalism is called capitalism for a reason – money – capital is what it's all about, right? The golden rule – they who have the gold make the rules. Come on Jesus, the rich have always carried the poor and besides how many heroes or celebrities in our country are poor? Sorry, Jesus, we don't see it that way. Jesus says, No, those who are poor are a blessing for though they don't have a lot of things, their faith is great because it's all they have – theirs is the Kingdom of God. Jesus says, The rich are a problem to the poor, and not the other way around. The poor will receive nothing less than all the glory that is the Kingdom of God.

He says the same thing about the hungry. You mean to tell us, Jesus, that the millions of people we're called to feed through the Word of Christ and Breadbasket are really blessings? That they will be forever filled and satisfied at the sumptuous table of the heavenly banquet. That those of us who stuff ourselves at all-you-can-eat-buffets are the ones who should be careful – we're the ones who will be hungry? Excuse me, Jesus, you've been out in the sun too long. And now you're saying those whose lives are torn apart by grief and sorrow and depression – who find themselves crying several times a day – they will be the ones to laugh several times a day in the Kingdom of God? That they will bubble over with laughter and light heartedness, that joy will fill their lives?

And now what are you saying, Jesus? That if everyone speaks highly of us, that we'd better take a look at ourselves? You want us to be happy and leap for joy that people hate us because we speak your name or act in your name? You gotta be kidding! Let me get this straight – if in your name and for your sake, we catch hell from other people, our reward in heaven will be great? Yet I also think Jesus says to us: Those who place yourselves in the paths of the sick and smelly and the possessed – Wow! Those who support and simply lift up in prayer the rest of the family of God – Wow! Those who side with someone whom society has marginalized – Wow! Those who come to worship with a sense of joy and expectance – Wow! Those who use their gifts in service to God and others – Wow!

But woe to those who gossip about and speak ill of others. Woe to those who live lives as beaten down sinners. Woe to those of you who lament the condition of your spiritual life but who do nothing about it. Woe to those of us who never take advantage of an opportunity to speak the name of Jesus to someone – who have never ever invited anyone to church. Woe to those of us who are starving our souls, who limit ourselves to pint sized visions of the Kingdom of God. Woe to those of us who refuse to live the abundant life that Jesus Christ offers. Woe to you who are satisfied with your life and content in your faith, for that can be the death of a loving relationship with a living God. But – Blessed – Congratulations – Wow! To you who have placed your trust in God.

Let us pray. Lord, again we confess that our lives are not joyful enough. Perhaps it is because we have too much, like the rich and the full, or because we're shallow, like those who laugh now, or because we work too hard at being respected, like those who are well spoken of. These things crowd our minds and we cannot concentrate on you and the Kingdom. Forgive us, Lord, and lead us into a new level of understanding where we shall know true blessedness. For your Kingdom is not only forever, but is here not. Amen.