

Flipping the Script

Luke 6:17-26

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ 11 March 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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.

22 "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

23 "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you [a] 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.

26 "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

27 "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

(Luke 6:17-26, NRSV)

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Last Sunday was the 90th Academy Award Ceremony for the movie industry. Perhaps some of you watched the show. Some of you, I know, watch it for the fashion. Some to see if your favorite movie gets honored. And some of you to see who makes the biggest mistake on live TV.

But this year you might have paid attention to see if there were any surprises in the movies themselves. You might have wondered if there were any movies that

didn't just rehash all the standard storylines, but really did something unexpected. Have you ever seen a movie that "flipped the script?" Where the usual plots were totally overturned? There are actually several movies in 2017 and 2018 that fall into this category.

"Wonder Woman" is a comic book movie where a woman saves the world without the help of a man. "Get Out" is a horror film where black people are threatened and no white hero comes to make things right. "Lady Bird" (everybody's favorite Sacramento film) is a coming of age tale that doesn't put down religion but actually treats Catholicism with honesty and respect. And "Black Panther" is a superhero movie in which a beautiful African Country is portrayed as the center of wealth, technology, and dignity in its world.

These are movies, of course. But you know, sometimes the Bible can flip the script too. Sometimes scripture overturns our expectations. I think that is exactly what Jesus is doing in the passage we read today. He is changing our religious expectations. He is changing our view of societal norms and values.

Now most of us are familiar with a different version of the beatitudes. They come not from the Gospel of Luke (that we read today) but from the Gospel of Matthew.¹ In Matthew's version - there are nine beatitudes, nine blessing, and no "woes." No "woes" - that's important.

And the blessings themselves are different too. In Matthew, Jesus says things like... "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—not "blessed are the poor." Or "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"—not blessed are the hungry. You see, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus seems to emphasize very earthy, social concerns versus what seem to be personal, even things we might call "spiritual" concerns in the Gospel of Matthew.

Notice in the Luke reading how Jesus grounds things in the present moment, how Jesus shows an awareness of our everyday lives. Blessed are you who are hungry *now*. Blessed are you who weep *now*. Jesus stands here with us in the present.

Even the physical location of these two sets of speeches is important. Matthew 5 - 7 is often called the "Sermon

¹ The beatitudes of Matthew appear in Matthew 5:1-12.

on the Mount” as Jesus is speaking from a high place.² Luke’s version is sometimes called the “Sermon on the Plain” as we are told that Jesus “came down with them and stood on a level place.”³ Mountains (think Mount Sinai) are often thought as the place God’s speaks. Jesus was transfigured on a mountain. And think how often we talk about “mountaintop experiences.”

But valleys and plains are where the stuff of life happens. Psalm 23 says, “I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” The old African American spiritual tells us that, “Jesus walked this lonesome valley.” The plain, the valley is where all the messiness of our existence resides. This is where we find the hard stuff.

The point is this: Jesus is reminding us of our earthly cares - and not letting us avoid the stuff of life. We can’t escape into some heavenly realm. This is where Jesus meets us. Jesus flips the script from heavenly to earthly. Our day-to-day life matters to Jesus. Jesus flips the script from the otherworld to this world.

The second thing we notice here, again different from those things mentioned in Matthew, are the “woes.” For every blessing in this passage there is a complementary woe. Four blessings, four woes. It’s the woes that wake us up - it is the woes that shock us into awareness. In the blessings, we have wonderful promises (albeit to people who are often overlooked), in the woes we have judgment (or at least painful observations).

Perhaps we should translate “blessings” and “woes” in a different way.⁴ Perhaps this will help us see the full impact of Jesus’ words. The word “blessing,” sometimes translated as “happy” doesn’t give us the full impact of what Jesus is saying here. You see, “blessing” is not so much about an emotional state, but rather a statement of that which we value. Blessed are the poor could be something like “we salute” the poor or “we honor” the poor.

Woes (not a word we use every much these days) could be more accurately translated “we scorn.” “We scorn” the rich, “we scorn” those who are full. I’m not sure I really like this translation. It actually makes this passage more cringe worthy and even harder to hear. For you see I know that I am rich. I know that I am full. I know that I am laughing. I know that I am well spoken of.

So, that being said, is this good news for me, for us? Does Jesus just want me to feel guilty? Who really wants to hear this stuff? Yet for some reason Jesus wants us to attend to this seemingly negative judgment on ourselves and on many in our world and church.

In this passage, Jesus is not only affirming those who are downtrodden, but offering an uncomfortable word to those of us who find ourselves in a comfortable place. This is where Jesus meets us. He flips the script from positive to negative. He offers a word for those who are full and those who are empty Jesus flips the script from easy encouragement to hard challenge.

Finally, let’s drill down just a bit more into Jesus’ particular words. He takes us from spiritual to earthly and from affirmation to judgment. But in the details of the blessings and the woes, Jesus is also very specific about the values of the kingdom. And for some reason he is not all that kind to the things we value in our world. The picture he paints of the kingdom of God is not the picture of the things that are so important to us. Wealth — insignificant. Full tummies — fleeting. Earthly happiness — irrelevant. Reputation — useless.

Interestingly, while in this passage Jesus boldly affirms our earthly *existence*, he also seems to dismantle the importance of our worldly *values*. What in the world is Jesus doing here?

The text tells us that Jesus is teaching his disciples (with the crowds also looking on). But pay careful attention, for in his teaching he is not saying to them “be this way” or “be that way.” He is not giving them a set of commands with the blessings and woes. Jesus is simply describing reality. *He is just telling us the way things are.*

Think about it this way, it is as if we have impaired vision and Jesus is giving us a new set of glasses to see things clearly. He is telling us what is really important and what is unimportant. He is reminding us that the values and people that we put on top may actually be on the bottom, and that the values and people that we put on the bottom may actually be on top. He is telling us that those who may be called “losers” by some in our day are not really that at all.

And lest you think this is some isolated, aberrant idea, we can hear this theme clearly throughout the Gospel of Luke. Remember the words from Mary in Luke’s Gospel when she heard about the birth of her son?

**“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**

² Matthew 5:1, *NRSV*.

³ Luke 6:17, *NRSV*.

⁴ These are some thoughts from Pastor Sarah Dylan Breuer, http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2007/02/sixth_sunday_af.html

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.⁵

The powerful are brought down, the lowly are lifted the hungry are filled and the rich are sent without anything. Sound familiar? The world's values are upended.

Or call to mind Luke chapter 4 when Jesus read this passage in his hometown synagogue:

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”⁶**

Can you see the connection to the blessings and woes? Again, the world's values are overturned.

Still, though, I look at this and ask, what is the good news? These blessings and woes all seem a bit bleak, even a bit destructive. How is God changing me in this? How is God calling me here?

It might be easy to take this passage as a Christian form of identity politics, as a way of proclaiming, the poor, the weeping, the hungry, and the abused are all better people and more loved by God. But that is clearly not what Jesus is saying here.

Gustavo Gutierrez was a theologian who pioneered a way of thinking about God among the poor of Latin America called “liberation theology.” He makes this comment about the poor:

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 agapeic love.”⁷

Let me say it more simply. The kingdom is found among those who are desperate and really know their need for God. If we have got it all together on our own power, as the beatitude says, “we have already received our consolation.”

But the kingdom is found where human power has come to it’s end, and only God’s power can suffice. This is the great reversal that we find Jesus proclaiming in the Gospel of Luke. This is how Jesus is flipping the script.

Let me end by saying a few words about a man who I think flipped the script on human values as well as anyone. Some of you know that this is the 50th anniversary year of the show called “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” There is much to be said about Fred Rogers, but those of you who know his work know that he changed not only how we view children’s television, but how we view children. Back in his early days, Fred Rogers put it this way:

I saw this new thing called television, and I saw people throwing pies in each other’s faces, and I thought, this could be a wonderful tool for education! Why is it being used this way? So I said to my parents, “You know, I don’t think I’ll go into seminary right away. I think I’ll go into television.”⁸

Fred Rogers flipped the script for children. He taught us how to listen, to respect, to be honest, and to really be there for children. He taught us to embrace their humanity. He held up values that society often set aside.

Fred Rogers is one of my heroes, and I could talk about him for hours. But I want to leave you with a video clip of him receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Television Academy at the 1997 Emmy broadcast. Pay careful attention. In the midst of a room full of fame, beauty, and wealth, watch how Mr. Rogers flips the script even in this moment...

[See Film Clip of Fred Rogers at the 1997 Emmys]⁹
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upm9LnuCBUM>

⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez, “Song and Deliverance,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, p 131.

⁸ <http://mentalfloss.com/article/31389/mister-rogers-epic-9-part-45-hour-interview>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upm9LnuCBUM>

⁵ Luke 1:47-53, *NRSV*.

⁶ Luke 4:18-19, *NRSV*.

In the presence of all the self-congratulation and noise, all the glitter and glamor, Mr. Rogers brought simplicity, silence, and loving reflection to this occasion. In his own understated yet subversive way, he helped all who were watching see things with new eyes.

Jesus gives us this same gift. And like people who came from all around, like his disciples, we too have come to see and hear Jesus. Blessed are you who see with new eyes. Blessed are you who can see that the script has been flipped. Blessed are you when you know that in Jesus, everything has changed.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Have you ever been in a situation when someone did something totally unexpected - where they “flipped the script?” How did you respond?
2. Reread the Passage from Luke 6:17-26. What really stands out to you?
3. What is most unexpected (even unwelcome) in what Jesus says in these blessings and woes?
4. Why do those who are poor, weeping, hungry, and abused seem to be favored in these words from Jesus? Do you find yourself embracing or resisting Jesus’ words?
5. Are you more likely to be a person named in the “blessings” category or someone named in the “woes” category? How does that make you feel about Jesus’ words?
6. What is one thing you used to think about church and Christian faith that has been reversed? Is there some way that being a Christian makes you think differently about the world than you used to?
7. Have you ever encountered someone living in pain or under oppression? Did it change you in any way?

8. Jim talked about Mr. Rogers as “flipping the script” in a way that respected and empowered children (sometimes the most overlooked individuals in our society). Can you think of other figures in history, government, entertainment, and religion who “flipped the script” on our way of living life? What was the effect of their work and life?

Table to Table Question A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why do you think God cares so much for those who are poor?
Do you think Jesus wants us to live life like everyone else?