

“Blessings and Woes”
C Epiphany Six; Luke 6:17-26
February 17, 2019; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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You’re Blessed (the MSG)

¹⁷⁻²¹ Coming down off the mountain with them, he stood on a plain surrounded by disciples, and was soon joined by a huge congregation from all over Judea and Jerusalem, even from the seaside towns of Tyre and Sidon. They had come both to hear him and to be cured of their ailments. Those disturbed by evil spirits were healed. Everyone was trying to touch him—so much energy surging from him, so many people healed! Then he spoke:

You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all.

God’s kingdom is there for the finding.

You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry.

Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal.

You’re blessed when the tears flow freely.

Joy comes with the morning.

²²⁻²³ “Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like

a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don’t like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.

Give Away Your Life

²⁴ But it’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made.

What you have is all you’ll ever get.

²⁵ And it’s trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself.

Your *self* will not satisfy you for long.

And it’s trouble ahead if you think life’s all fun and games.

There’s suffering to be met, and you’re going to meet it.

²⁶ “There’s trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.

I. BLESSING KIND OF PERSON?

Are you a “blessing” kind of person? Do you “count your blessings?” Are you a “woe is me” kind of person? Or a little of both, perhaps?!

Do you like to be told “be blessed,” or does that kind of make your skin crawl just a little? Does it ever feel like “blessing someone” or being blessed by another is a bit like “shoulding on”, telling you that you should

feel or be something you might not *feel* like being right now? Darnit!

It's kind of like the words "we'll *pray* for you." Ever been told, "Oh, we'll pray for you" in a tone that can feel a bit assaultive, or like it has an agenda behind it? "Be blessed" or "count your blessings" can feel like a subtle guilt trip sometimes. Or *not* so subtle!

Last night I was having trouble sleeping, as I often do on Saturday nights, with sermons and children's sermons and church leadership meetings spinning around in my head. A song came to mind:

"COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS"

When I'm worried and I can't sleep
I count my blessings instead of sheep
And I fall asleep counting my blessings.

When my bankroll is getting small
I think of when I had none at all
And I fall asleep counting my blessings.....

It does work from time to time, thinking of all the things I'm grateful for, as I'm snuggled up in a warm bed in a warm house with loved ones all around, both 2-legged and 4-legged. When I've had a good day of work and play, with delicious homemade food, and really, all I could ask for in abundance. (Yes, even enough snow!)

"Count your blessings, name them one by one....." Age-old wisdom, still good for today. And I began to drift off to sleep.

But then, something else happens. Do you ever find when you start counting your blessings, that your mind starts to drift? And, maybe, slowly, some woes start to creep in....? And then your gratitude list starts to have "requests" added to it?

"Well, God, I *would* be grateful for this and that, but.....it would be *better* if that issue wasn't an issue or got resolved, or that person wasn't mad at me anymore or.....And, I'd be even *more* grateful if I *weren't* lying here (and tossing!) having to count my blessings because I can't sleep. And I'm getting tired of counting sheep!

It also may not be so self-centered. We had just watched a movie last night about Sitting Bull and the native tribes and calvary conflicts leading up Wounded Knee. The movie, "Woman Walks Ahead" gave a powerful glimpse of the terrible oppression and injustice waged on our Native brothers and sisters by our own government back in the 1880's.

And my mind was filled with guilt and shame and pain for the great suffering of peoples whose land, home and lives were destroyed without cause or remorse.

And, my counting my blessings became a source of pain for those in our land and beyond who, even now, *don't* have warm beds and homes and full bellies, with loved ones all around—through no fault of their own.

"Woe is me" was not what came to mind, but: woe to *all* of us who don't care enough to fight and care for

the least of these among us, as Jesus commanded us to do.

Blessings and woes. Jesus lays it out for us. You are blessed! Even when life doesn't go the way it should. And that is a fact. But it's *not* an excuse. Woe to us, if we tell the hurting, ostracized and suffering people among us that they are "blessed" and go on our way without trying to help. Without caring deeply for the world beyond ourselves and our own front door or neighborhood.

II. BLESSED WITH

But, back up for just a moment. In this passage, something significant happens before Jesus gets to laying out the blessings and woes. David Lose says, and I agree with him: the most important word in this passage is *not* "Blessed." Even though there are a lot of "blessed are you" in there. Nor is it "woes." Phew! Bible passages with a lot of "woe to you" are not our favorites. Definitely not the ones we like to preach on and listen to—at least not in this kind of church ☺

Nope. The most important word in this passage (and perhaps in our language anywhere, is "with." Right there –did you catch it at the very beginning of the passage? "Coming down off the mountain *with* them."

Why is this little word so important?

"Because "with" connects. It joins. It adds. And by connecting, joining, and adding it creates something new. It is incredibly relational. Luke's Jesus is very concerned with social equity and favor for those with less. And Jesus is *with* them—every one of them.

Jesus does not only care for the poor, but also, for those who are excluded, for those who have been left behind, for those who have not been treated fairly, for those who have been left out. Jesus cares for all those who need him. "Jesus' came down with them and stood on a level place...." Of course he did. So that we might, too. (David Lose)

Jesus is not up on the mountaintop, or even at the top of the hill or in a pulpit or in the synagogue this time, preaching to the eagerly listening crowds below. Nope. He is right there with the disciples, with the peasants in the crowd. In the midst. Alongside. Giving them words of wisdom for life—but not just for them. Words of wisdom for himself as well.

Jesus—in all his teaching and preaching— didn't ever tell them to do things he wasn't willing to do himself. I would hope that most preachers wouldn't, but I haven't always found that to be the case!

And he wasn't making pronouncements *upon* them: "Be blessed!" Even though life stinks sometimes, and you're poor and hungry and oppressed, buck up! Hang in there, be tough!" No, Jesus is right there with them, looking for hope and encouragement – and yes, challenge – *together*.

III. BLESSED OR

Jesus echoes here a core tenet of the Hebrew religion. From the giving of the Law—the Way to Live in Covenant with God. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses and the Children of Israel had a crucial choir laid out for them by Yahweh:

¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,

And, on down through the ages, that same choice is laid out before all humankind. For surely, we have a choice in *every* situation and relationship: to bless or to curse. To choose to find the blessings or focus on the woes. Both in the giving of a response and the receiving and responding to what is presented to us.

Curses may sound like a strong word—we don't go around cursing people or intentionally adding to their woes. But, when we turn a blind eye, choose not to respond, stay in our comfortable lives and comfort zones when people are suffering injustice and oppression, we are choosing *not* to bless.

That's a hard thing to hear – for all of us. And this is not a guilt-trip sermon. It's a hard thing in this life—knowing what to do and how to help. Indifference or inertia may be our greatest temptation. They may also be well-founded when we have been hurt and smacked down when we've tried to help before. Or, when our efforts have gone unappreciated or hit roadblocks.

The danger, in our white, middle-class America setting, is not that we will “curse our neighbor” rather than bless, but that we will pull into our shell like a turtle because we *can*. We don't *have* to stick our necks out and risk being hurt or our ideas stomped on, so we have the privilege of choosing to play it safe, stay

home, maintain the status quo, keep on with business as usual and *not* make the proactive and risky “choice to bless.” To boldly “BE a blessing.”

Perhaps we can learn from others who found themselves in this position and made a brave choice to bless – even when they didn't have to.

IV. CHOOSING TO BLESS

A. Membership rather than a Ticket:

A Chicago teen had been repeatedly warned about sneaking onto the basketball court at a [Skokie](#) fitness facility, but one police officer came up with an alternative to arresting him for criminal trespassing.

In late August, X-Sport Fitness workers made good on a promise that police would be called in if they found the boy on the basketball court again.

"We had no choice but to contact police," said X-Sport Operations Manager Justin Pritchett.

He said only a day after being warned, the boy – who lives just over the Skokie border in Chicago – tried to sneak in yet again. Pritchett said the teenager – about age 15 – would repeatedly walk past the front desk and onto the court. At one point, he said, the boy hid in a bathroom stall to try to elude fitness center employees so he could play hoops with friends.

"He had had a membership, but his mother could not afford to pay for it anymore and it expired," Pritchett said. "All he wanted to do was play basketball."

Skokie police Officer Mario Valenti responded to the call for police that August day. What happened next surprised everyone at X-Sport, Pritchett said.

Valenti offered to pay \$150 out of his own pocket, asking fitness center workers how much membership time that would buy for the boy. The answer was three to four months, and

Pritchett called the corporate office to report the situation, he said.

According to Pritchett, corporate was so taken with what the officer was doing that it made its own offer: The \$150 would go toward a two-year membership with a total value of \$718 and X-Sport Fitness would pick up the rest of the cost.

"We all were flabbergasted here," Pritchett said. "I know X-Sport takes care of our members so after we ran a background check and found out he had had no other trouble, we went ahead."

They later learned that the boy, who attends a Chicago school, was an NBA hopeful, a skilled player who had received national attention for his on-court accomplishments.

B. Weekly Walks Turn to Wonder

As a college student, a young woman I know was struggling to pay tuition, books and living expenses...a situation many of us have experienced. To pay for these expenses, she worked part-time at a convenience store in her city. Every Saturday morning, an older man in well worn work clothes would bring a one gallon can to her store to get fuel for his mowing chores. Every Saturday like clock work he would show up and over time they began visiting. She had no idea who he was or where he lived in the neighborhood but he was friendly and pleasant. She began buying him a cup of coffee to accompany their visits. He would ask how her classes were going and other things about her life as a student. Each Saturday they would spend a little time visiting and sharing coffee.

One Saturday in the course of their conversation, she confided in him that her books for the semester were

going to cost \$600...a sum that she just didn't have. She told this gentleman that she was going to have to lay out a semester and work to save the money for her books.

The next Saturday when she came into work, the manager told her there was an envelope with name on it...not a common occurrence. When she opened the envelope, there was a check inside for \$600 and a note from her disheveled weekly customer that simply said "stay in school" ...signed by Warren Buffet...Yes, the unobtrusive man that she had befriended was the billionaire CEO of Berkshire Hathaway. She had done nothing for him that warranted recognition. He just appreciated her for her wonderful spirit and wanted to help her succeed...

C. Hotels for the homeless

A little kindness goes a long way, especially for those who need shelter when disastrous weather strikes. Earlier this week, as the Midwest was hunkering down for subzero temperatures and piles of snow, many homeless people across the region were left without many (or any) resources to keep them safe from the dangerous weather. That's when one anonymous donor in made sure at least 80 people living on the streets of Chicago were able to find shelter in hotel rooms.

Volunteer Candice Payne, "impulsively" charged 20 hotel rooms on her American Express card when she realized how dangerous the cold temperatures were going to be. She then posted about it on social media, according to CBS Chicago.

And for people who were living in a tent city around a propane tank for heat (which exploded on Wednesday), it was

especially good that she did. After seeing Payne's act of kindness, other volunteers started to follow suit, buying up a total of 60 hotel rooms for homeless people to stay warm in the polar vortex.

Payne didn't even know the other volunteers who helped buy the other hotel rooms. "Maybe they didn't know how to or where to start to help, so I'm glad that I was able to be that vehicle," Payne said.

All in all, the group of volunteers were able to cover three nights stays for all 80 people. They hope to work together in the future for a more long-term solution to help the city's homeless population.

D. Community Garden

'I wanted to do more for people than just pray'

WASHINGTON — Several years ago, Rev. Heber Brown III decided he needed to do more than pray. The now 38-year-old pastor at Pleasant Hope Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, noticed more members of his congregation were suffering from diet-related illnesses. In Baltimore City, [one in three](#) residents is obese and [12 percent](#) has Type 2 diabetes — two conditions that disproportionately affect black Americans.

Additionally, [34 percent](#) of black residents in Baltimore live in **food deserts** (compared to 8 percent of white residents) and don't have regular access to fresh, healthy and affordable foods.

So Brown turned to seeds, in addition to scripture, and started a garden on a 1,500-square-foot plot of land in front of the church. Today, that garden grows everything from summer squash to kale, and yields 1,100 pounds of produce — all to feed the community that meets weekly to worship.

"It was amazing," said Brown. "We saw attendance bump up in our worship, we saw a great energy ... and it went so [well]

here, that I wondered what would happen if we could spread it through other churches and create a network of churches that do the same thing."

In 2015, Brown launched [The Black Church Food Security Network](#) — a grassroots initiative that empowers black churches to establish a sustainable food system to combat the systemic injustices and disparities that plague black Americans, who, according to [data](#) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are sicker and poorer than non-black Americans.

The network currently operates at more than 10 congregations in Baltimore, most of which are [located](#) in the city's "food priority areas." There are also participating churches and farms in D.C., Virginia and North Carolina — and the list is growing. "We have people contacting us from all over — different religions, different parts of the city. ... The phone is always ringing, the emails are always coming in from churches saying, 'Hey, we want in,'" said Brown, who added that he also receives interest from people of different races.

'It just makes sense'

Merging faith and food may seem unconventional to some, but Brown said every time he talks about connecting churches with agriculture, he gets "ready amens and strong head nods."

"It just makes sense," said Brown.

"Spirituality and agriculture have a deep relationship that is outlined in sacred scripture and that is practiced in weekly gatherings in worship spaces, and so I have no problem getting people to buy into this vision."

These days, Brown does less digging and harvesting and focuses more on connecting communities with farmers and matching volunteers with various church gardens. He also helps churches figure out how to make use of the space they *already own* — classrooms, kitchens and land — most of which are only utilized once a week. "And I think that's a gross waste of resources." It's also an empowering and sustainable

model when it comes to fighting hunger. Too often, food insecure communities receive charity, which is great in emergency situations, but is not a long-term fix.

Brown sees these efforts “going far into the future,” one community at a time. He dreams of a day when churches across the country have markets where “people can come and praise and worship and sing and get a good chunk of the groceries they need for their household at the same time.”

“If you come in with the mentality that I cannot be fully free until everybody is fully free, it makes for better partners,” he said.

Ubuntu! Shalom. Namaste. Love in any language.

V. CHOOSE TO BE A BLESSING—CUCC!

So, here we are today. A “church on the move,” launching into our new year and leadership model. Even if you’re not serving on a team right, you’re *on* this boat, and we are sailing! With! We are all in this together, as we answer the call to Be the Church; *be* Christ’s Body –hands and feet, eyes and ears, hearts that hold one another in love.

We have a choice before us as a congregation –in every planning, meeting, effort, project, reaching out and reaching in: will we “choose to bless” –not just ourselves but everyone we meet or have yet to meet? Or, will we wring our hands and wallow in the woes? “Woe is us,” or “blessed we are?!”

What will be said of us—in a year, in 5 years? What will our story be after today?

“They maintained! Or better yet: They *thrived!* They didn’t just age and shrink and die like so many churches, but survived!” They didn’t just re-write the

By-laws and re-organize their org chart, but put their faith into action, went out on a limb, trusted in the change-making, still-speaking God who called and still calls them forward.

Will they say, “CUCC chose to be a blessing! That congregation stuck its neck out, built a bigger table, drew the circle wider, didn’t shrink back for fear of “being controversial”. They put their faith into action.

Those banners weren’t just words:

God IS still speaking there, and the message is “Love is STILL the way and love is the only way” and love looks like a *lot* of things. The hungry are fed, the sick at heart find healing, the garden teems with abundance, the homeless find shelter, the marginalized find a place at the Table.

We have a choice in every moment, every day and every circumstance. We can bring blessings or curses. Add to the support of our fellow children of God, or play a part in adding to the woes. What will we choose? Amen. Let us sing.

THE BLESSING SONG:

Let it be said of us while we walked among the living
Let it be said of us by the ones we leave behind
Let it be said of us that we lived to be a blessing for life

And let it be said of us that we gave to reach the dying
Let it be said of us by the fruit we leave behind
Let it be said of us that our legacy is blessing for life!