

SERMON: The Balance of Blessings and Woes

TEXT: Luke 6:17-26

I've been thinking about parenting styles. Whether you are a parent or not, all of us have some understanding of parenting styles because all of us were children once, raised by parents or grandparents or someone else. No matter who raised you, that person or persons had a particular style regarding rewards and punishment, affection and correction.

Perhaps you were raised in a time when the father was the disciplinarian, and the woodshed was the place where you would suffer the pain of a switch cut from a nearby tree across your backside. Maybe instead of going to college, you were expected to quit school at a certain age to work on the farm or to help support the family. Maybe you grew up running all over the neighborhood from dawn until dusk, and your parents' only worried if you weren't home within five minutes of the town clock striking six. Maybe you had to work for everything, or maybe you were born with the proverbial silver spoon.

I read an article in which the author discussed four categories of traditional parenting. The *authoritarian* parent had zero tolerance for misbehavior and also left little room for affection or nurturing. The *authoritative* parent provided a good

balance of strictness and nurturing. The *permissive* parent was lenient and indulgent – more like a friend than a parent. And the *uninvolved* parent was unresponsive and uncommunicative.

Modern parenting styles include *attachment parenting*, in which the mother, especially is constantly touching or in very close physical proximity to the child, and the child decides when to eat, sleep, and make their milestones. *Helicopter parents* do everything in their power to make sure their child is safe and sound at all times. *Free-range parenting* involves giving children a very long leash, providing room for them to make mistakes and learn about the real world first hand. With *Tiger parents*, children are expected to follow very strict rules and perform at the highest levels in every area of their lives. (Michelle Zunter, *Parenting Styles & Labels from the Last Three Decades*, www.wehavekids.com, December 13, 2018)

It occurred to me that the Sermon on the Plain (as it is commonly known) from the gospel of Luke could be seen as a description of God's parenting style.

Both Matthew (in the Sermon on the Mount) and Luke contain the Beatitudes, or the Blessings, as we might refer to them. Most people I know prefer Matthew's version, and whenever you hear them quoted or see them used in

artwork or decorations or all sorts, it is Matthew's version that is used. Why? Because Matthew's version records only the blessings and none of the woes.

Nobody really cares much for the woes. Just like we don't care for the violence of the Old Testament, or the vindictive prayers against enemies in some of the Psalms. Even the lectionary tends to steer clear of such negativity and harshness; in a three-year cycle through the Bible many passages and verses are never included. The only time we seem to pay attention to the "woes" is when we can point them accusingly at someone else whom we judge to be headed for eternal damnation.

It makes me think of children, often siblings in a family who delight in any opportunity to catch each other not following the rules. "I'm telling Dad!"
"You're in trouble now!"

We are still a lot like children. For ourselves, we think we want that permissive or free-range parent with whom we can do whatever we want and still be rewarded with love and affection. We wish for a world of blessings only, *especially* when we don't deserve it. But when it comes to others, we want the

authoritarian parent who's ready to lower the boom at even the threat of misbehavior. Woe to you!

Well, there are a couple things wrong with the way we think of blessings and woes. First of all, we all need boundaries. In fact, without boundaries, children struggle with feelings of insecurity, and the world becomes a place of chaos. Blessings are nice, but woes are necessary to keep us in line.

Furthermore, I think we tend to believe that blessings and woes are categories, boxes into which we are placed, never to escape. Forever blessed or forever cursed. Instead, perhaps we should think of these as God's expectations and warnings for us. The *dos* and the *don'ts* in the kingdom of God. The assurance and the caution that our current circumstances – poor or rich, hungry or full, weeping or laughing – are *not* a sign of God's favor or disfavor and need not be permanent. In this lesson, Jesus is drawing the boundary lines for the kind of living that makes God rejoice in us.

We've done this great pendulum swing in Christianity from an emphasis on fire and brimstone, hell and damnation, living in fear of God's terrible wrath, to the opposite extreme of cheap grace: I'm okay, you're ok, sin boldly because God

loves you no matter what. We've gone from thinking of God as the authoritarian, zero-tolerance parent to God as the permissive, indulgent parent. What we need is to find a BALANCE BETWEEN BLESSINGS AND WOES. We need to know we are loved, but we also need correction and guidance. We know it's not healthy to beat ourselves up all the time for all the mistakes we make and for the misdeeds of our past. But it's also not healthy to constantly pat ourselves on the back and think that we can do no wrong.

Everybody knows what can happen to a sports team or anyone that enjoys great success. We get cocky about it. We get puffed up and over-confident, full of ourselves. And then what happens? We choke. We trip over our own feet. We get knocked off our pedestal of pride. Woe to you.

As we read from the prophet Jeremiah, "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings."

Poor or rich, hungry or full, weeping or laughing, our circumstances are *not* the result of God's judgment or favor as was commonly believed in Biblical times.

But God *will* judge our hearts and our minds to determine whether our trust is in mere mortals or in the Lord.

One contemporary theologian wrote of her own discomfort with the black and white distinctions, the stark contrast of blessings and woes. “I do not want to be poor, hungry, reviled, or hated, but being blessed by God would be great. Nor do I want woe to come my way, but laughter and praise feel pretty good, if I am being honest. Clearly, I am looking for nuance, gray area, the ability to add my own, more comfortable interpretation to these texts. But what if I set that temptation aside and... start with the literal interpretation of the text, the simple reading, the most straightforward understanding. What would that be? Put your trust in God. Question your certainty about yourself, your abilities, power, wisdom, and strength. Practice a good dose of humility.... Do not equate earthly success with divine approval.... Be very wary of becoming full and happy and admired. Be careful of succumbing to the game of seeking affirmation and adulation.... Divine blessing is not tied to earthly accolades. God knows your heart, regardless of what others think of you.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking into the lectionary*, 6th

Sunday after Epiphany. The Presbyterian Outlook, February 11, 2019)

Whether rich or poor, full or hungry, laughing or weeping, “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

May we trust in the Lord, rely on the Holy Spirit, and strive to follow Christ. May we be humble and grateful in all our circumstances... to the glory of God!

AMEN.