

A change of heart

When I was growing up, the oldest of 4 children, my mom assigned us a regular roster of chores to help keep the house running. We did laundry, cleaned bathrooms, mowed the lawn. And throughout the week, we would take turns - sometimes in pairs - cleaning the kitchen after dinner. Sometimes we would protest and drag our feet so much that a 15 minute job took hours.

In any case, one week my middle sister, then in her teens, decided she'd rather cook the dinner for the family than clean up, that would be her contribution. Maybe she thought it'd be easier or more fun or that she'd make a better dinner than our mom. In any case, I know for sure she viewed her effort as a gift to the family.

On that day, she planned a menu, made sure we had all the ingredients, cooked the food - making sure it was all ready at the same time - and then called all six of us all to the table. It was a week night, a work and school night, so we all came from our various locations throughout the house, blessed the food, ate it quickly, and then asked to be excused back to whatever we were doing before the meal. I'm sure the meal took less than half an hour.

When the table was empty, my sister sat down, looked at the messy plates and crumpled napkins and sighed. She shed a tear.

My mom sat next to her and asked what was wrong.

"I worked so hard," my sister said, "and no one said thank you."

"I know," said my mom. I think it took a whole day for my sister to realize that was my mom's experience almost every day.

Certainly, my sister had never thanked her. In any case, it was sad in the moment and later a family joke that got funnier when we started having our own kids.

It was a great leveling experience. A role reversal. The thankless learning about thankfulness.

The beatitudes that Jesus teaches us - the blessings and woes that align with our situations in life - have a similar theme of reversal. In his examples, there is a stark difference between the ones who are blessed and the ones who are not. They are set before us as opposites

Poor and rich.

Hungry and full.

Weeping and laughing.

Reviled and admired.

In life, however, situations don't always line up so easily or so neatly.

Sometimes one who is poor might also be well regarded.

Or one who is rich can be struck with illness and tragedy.

Sometimes you are both the pampered child and the unthanked scullery maid, like my sister felt she was.

I don't mean to make light of the very real suffering people experience in life - not being thanked for dinner is not comparable to being poor or hungry, sick or oppressed. Some people suffer with few or no moments of gladness behind or ahead of them. Certainly the crowd around Jesus that day were more likely to have that experience, they were clearly desperate for relief from their suffering. And in this teaching, Jesus is not spiritualizing that suffering - he's talking about crushing poverty, not feeling unsuccessful; real hunger, not hunger for knowledge or recognition. He's talking about living your life being on the bottom rung of society, not surviving a bad rumor.

At the same time, many of us have experienced being on both sides of the blessing-woe equation. I'm sure we all know people who have radiated peace when they are experiencing great trauma, or people with great means who are isolated and lonely.

Jesus' teaching in the beatitudes can be hard to hear. It can make us wonder if one has to be poor to be blessed, or mournful to find joy. Are we to set aside the good things that come our way in life or face certain "woe?" Does God want us to suffer? And if not, what is its meaning? These categories of blessing and woe seem to divide us from each other.

This is both a comforting and hard word, depending which side of the fortune lottery you sit. A hard word is not a bad word, however. Hearing the truth is always an opportunity to grow closer to God and to each other.

There is a clue just before the beatitudes that helps me see them in a still challenging but less divisive way.

Jesus stood on a level place to be with the crowd that had come great distances to see him. They all had great need, and he healed them all.

He gathered them all on a level place and he healed them all.

Jesus is not glamorizing suffering. He had just healed a great many sick and suffering people. So this teaching is not inviting us to be poor or hungry just to attain blessings.

The blessing that comes to anyone is a promise that God gives to all. God wants us to thrive, to flourish, to be fed and respected.

When Jesus gathers the crowd in a level place, he levels the field. The poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are excluded will be on the same field as those who are rich, full, laughing, and esteemed.

And that, of course, means that the reverse is happening also - the rich, full, and esteemed are on the same level as the poor, hungry, mournful, and reviled.

Once they are all on the same field, there are two ways to imagine things going according to Jesus' teaching:

One way of seeing it is a great reversal of roles, so that the poor become wealthy and the wealthy become poor, the hungry are fed and the full go hungry, those who weep find joy while the laughing mourn.

This is a zero sum equation. You get the good stuff now or later, not both. You are on one side or the other - blessed or cursed, haves or have-nots. Spiritually rich or materially rich - pick one.

There is another way. Perhaps instead of dividing us into two groups - the fortunate and the unfortunate - Jesus is creating a bridge that joins them. What if instead of a change in status, Jesus is talking about a change of heart?

Sometimes we weep because we have experienced pain and loss. Other times we weep because we see and feel the pain and loss of another. Frederick Buechner writes:

“...you weep, because if you have a heart to see it with, the world you see is in a thousand ways heartbreaking. Only the heartless can look at it unmoved, and that is presumably why Jesus says, "Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep," meaning a different sort of laughter altogether-the laughter of callousness, mockery, indifference (Luke 6:25). You can laugh like that only if you turn your back on the suffering and need of the world, and perhaps

for you the time for weeping comes when you see the suffering and need...”

When Jesus gathers us in a level place, it is more likely that we will see the heartbreak of our sisters and brothers and weep with them.

And we will also see the poverty, hunger, joy, and camaraderie. Together.

It is on the level field that Jesus heals all of us.

Most of us in Austin in the 21st century are pretty fortunate. We are among the materially wealthiest people who have ever lived on earth. We have access to greater food sources and health care than any of our forebears.

And at the same time, nearly all of us will experience material poverty or loss one way or another. And there is real suffering in our midst, as any of us who drive by homeless camps or have critically ill family members know. The invitation Jesus extends to us is that if we are among the fortunate - the rich, fed, happy, and adored - we join our sisters and brothers on the level field to weep with them.

The kingdom of God is a domain in which everyone is fed, laughing, and respected. It is a domain in which everyone is healed. We are not invited there so that we'll all be miserable. The hope and the promise is that those who do not weep now will eventually gain the insight and empathy to see the heartbreak all around them and join the rest of us in our weeping and in our blessing. You can't hope things will be better if you think they are already pretty great. And you can't imagine the kingdom of God if your own personal kingdom seems perfect.

Friends, the church is meant to be that level place. It is where
The Poor and rich,
The Hungry and full,

The Weeping and laughing,
The Reviled and admired

Gather and pray for one another. It is where we share hard times and happy times. It is where we remind each other that God wants our togetherness and our flourishing.

Jesus is pointing us to a great reversal. And that reversal will not leave anyone behind. It is a reversal from seeing people separated by their circumstance to being in the kingdom of God together. That is the blessing that Jesus promises us. Amen.