

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
 Luke 6:17-26

February 11, 2007  
 Rev. Robin Long

17He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, 18who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, 19and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

20Looking at his disciples, he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,  
 for yours is the kingdom of God.

21Blessed are you who hunger now,  
 for you will be satisfied.

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

22Blessed are you when men hate you,  
 when they exclude you and insult you  
 and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

23"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

24"But woe to you who are rich,  
 for you have already received your comfort.

25Woe to you who are well fed now,  
 for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,  
 for you will mourn and weep.

26Woe to you when all men speak well of you,  
 for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

The *Choose Your Own Adventure* series of books were popular when I was a kid. Each of the stories is written from a second person point-of-view, with the reader assuming the role of the main character. These books take children beyond the boredom of a hot and boring summer afternoon in, well let's just say the flatlands of northwest Ohio, to a world of adventure, intrigue, and challenge. There stories go something like this.

You are a student at The Suttons Bay Middle School. During a break between classes you discover a magic orb outside of the math classroom. The orb is glowing green and blue.

1. If you choose to pick up the orb, turn to page 6.
2. If you pass by the orb and go directly to math class, turn to page 8.

The *Choose Your Own Adventure* series provides a fine motif for a life of faith. At many junctures in life, we face a choice and our choices have consequences. Today you made the choice to get out of bed and come here—that choice has consequences, positive consequences—you feel the warmth of your church family, you are inspired by the hymns, you hear the Word of God from the liturgist, and you learn a little more about the passage of the day during the sermon. Now you could have chosen to stay home where you were warm and cozy and content. But, you weighed your options and made the choice to be here because the potential positive consequences far out weigh the negative.

But making the choice to get out of bed to come here this morning isn't the end of the choices you will be making today. This morning, I have in front of me on this pulpit, two different

sermons. And, I am asking you to make a choice—to choose your own adventure in faith this morning.

In an experiment that takes Congregational polity to a whole new level, we will take a vote on what today's sermon will be. And just for the record, all people—members or non-members—are invited to participate in this vote. I'll now ask our moderator, Brenda Ehle to affirm that there is a quorum. Brenda?

Okay. We have a quorum.

Now, we don't have a vice moderator who could be our tie breaking vote, like the vice-president is the tie breaker in the Senate.

The titles of the sermons from which you will choose are The Woe To's and The Blessed Be's. Both sermons are based on this morning's gospel passage from Luke. Now in order for you to make an educated choice, let me give you a brief introduction to each.

The Woe To's sermon contains explanation about Jesus' words of warning to the rich, the well fed, the happy, the content and those who are held in high regard. His words about them and to them are filled with caution and challenge.

Your other choice, The Blessed Be's sermon, contains explanations about Jesus' perspective on the poor, the sick, the hungry, the sad, and the reviled. His words about them and to them are filled with hope and promise.

And now, without further ado, let us vote.

All those who choose to hear the caution and challenges of the Woe To's sermon, please indicate your choice by raising your hand. (If reading online, please go to page 5.)

All those who choose to hear the hope and promise of the Blessed Be's sermon, please indicate your choice by raising your hand. (If reading online, please continue below.)

### **The Blessed Be's**

In these passages from Luke's gospel, Jesus addresses his twelve disciples. At this point in Jesus' ministry, the twelve disciples have just signed on; they have chosen a new adventure in faith. They're going through freshman orientation—learning the ropes, mastering the schedule, and reorienting their lives to new people and new places. And more importantly, they're reorienting their minds and souls to Jesus' message of compassion, love, and justice. What Jesus taught them was not old hat, it was a revolutionary new way of thinking and arguably there are no other passages in the Gospels that better exemplify his message than these, what in Matthew are called the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a primer in Christian thought and deed—they are the foundations upon which the disciples are being asked to build their ministries.

And while Jesus is teaching his gumshoe disciples these important realities of life, a crowd of people from all over the region gather. Scripture tells us that many came to Jesus not just to hear his teaching, but because they needed healing—some of the body and some of the mind. I imagine the scene to be something like what one would see in the waiting area of the Emergency Room, a place full of people in need of healing. No one sitting in an ugly, uncomfortable vinyl chair in the waiting area of the Emergency Room is at the top of their game. People in the waiting area at emergency room are hurting, they are worried, and they are, most often, quite sad. And they are waiting—waiting to see the doctor, waiting to have their pain relieved, waiting to get word about a loved one. People in the waiting area of the Emergency Room are vulnerable, they have little power, and they, quite literally, need to be saved from their pain, their sickness, and their worry.

And so too with all of those people gathered around Jesus. These are desperate people who have traveled for miles and miles over rocky mountains and through deserts of blowing sand. These are desperate people who have exhausted their options, run out of ideas, and have resorted to hunting down a perfect stranger who they have heard might be able to help them. These are desperate people who have been maligned by a society in which survival of the fittest is the rule and they are far from fit. These are Emergency Room waiting area people and they are desperate to see the doctor.

And when they arrive and meet this Jesus person, surely they must have been astounded at the ways he exceeded their expectations. Jesus was unlike all the others they'd gone to for help before. Jesus did not malign them, Jesus did not pity them, Jesus—of all things—Jesus blessed them! Jesus told them that the kingdom of heaven was theirs. In essence, Jesus told them that they were a lot better off than other folks around who had lots of money, influence, and authority.

Huh? If you ever volunteer at the food pantry, or the hospital, or the women's resource center, or the Goodwill Inn, I doubt very much if you look upon the hungry, the sick, the abused, or the homeless with envy. And yet, it is to them that Jesus tells us the kingdom of heaven belongs. They are the Blessed Be's the ones for whom Jesus has favor.

And the thing about the Blessed Be's is that, we've all been there. If you currently find yourself among the wealthy, healthy, and happy, I trust that your life hasn't always been this good. We've all been Blessed Be's. We've found ourselves in emergency rooms or besieged with grief or wondering where the money for our next grocery trip was coming from. We know what it's like to need a blessing. We, like the crowds gathering around Jesus, have gone looking for him, seeking healing, answers, and wholeness. And, to a certain extent, we have found those things. For we find ourselves here this morning to hear these words and we can reflect on those times in our lives when we were healed and there's no other explanation than that God blessed us through the love of Jesus Christ.

You've heard me mention this experience before but a reference again seems appropriate at this juncture. When I was pregnant I experienced a time of severe depression and anxiety. It was so bad that I ended up having to be hospitalized in Munson's Center One—their code word for psychiatric ward. Quite honestly, I don't know that I had ever found myself in the position of a

Blessed Be until that point in my life. Sure, I'd had some tough times but I had never lost confidence in my ability to get through it, thrive, and succeed. However, during that time in Centre One, I had lost all confidence in my ability to get through it, thrive, and succeed. I vividly remember a phone call I made to my dad. I was at the only public phone in the unit, standing in the hallway outside of the nurse's station with people in various states of sanity and insanity waiting in line behind me. With tears streaming down my face I said to him, "Dad, I can't quit this." Up until that point in my life, when the going got tough—I didn't get going, I simply quit going. Anything in life that I wasn't good at or didn't like I just quit—volleyball, basketball, ballet, jobs, and canine obedience class with our corgi Ruby. But this, this being depressed and anxious, being labeled mentally ill, it was something that I couldn't quit. It was something that I had to endure, had to live through, and hopefully something that I would survive. But for the first time in my life, I didn't know how I was going to do it. I didn't have a plan. I was sick and it felt like there wasn't a thing I could do about it. And yet, I was still sane enough to know that I couldn't quit trying to get my life back. It was a terrible moment. And it turned out to be, a moment of profound realization for me. The only way I was going to survive was if I gave up the illusion that I had control. The only way I was going to survive was to rely on the wisdom and treatment of others. In that moment, a moment in which I finally realized that I couldn't save myself, I realized that I needed a Savior. And Christ came and healed me with the help of some very well trained, and well-paid, disciples. And because I had that experience, I know what it is to be a blessed be. And I know, I know that in being a Blessed Be, I had the opportunity to experience Christ in ways that I no longer can as a Woe To—as someone who is healthy, well-nourished, receiving a regular paycheck, and just generally happy in this life.

And though it turned out to be one of the most meaningful times in my life, none of us chooses to become a Blessed Be. And, if we've been one we try like the dickens to avoid going back to being one again. But, if you've been there, this passage from Luke makes a whole lot more sense. If you are a Blessed Be, you realize that you can't go it alone. If you are a Blessed Be, you know that you need Jesus each moment just to make it through the day. If you are a Blessed Be, you know what it is to bear the cross of suffering. If you are a Blessed Be, hearing these words from Jesus this morning is like a salve to your soul for they remind you that this is not as good as it gets. If you are a Blessed Be, bless you for making the choice to get out of bed to come here this morning, because that choice was harder for you than it was for the Woe To's, the folks for whom life is pretty golden right now. And if you are a Blessed Be, rest assured that you will be resurrected from your despair, you will have a deeper relationship with God as a result of it, and in surviving and rising out of the depths of despair you will glimpse the glory of God, you will have peaked in on the Kingdom, and you will know that it is good. Thanks be to God for the Blessed Be's. May their discovery of justice, mercy, healing, and love be realized in this world because folks like you and me choose the adventure of following Jesus and doing his word in this world.

### **The Woe To's**

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Huh? If you ever volunteer at the food pantry, or the hospital, or the women's resource center, or the Goodwill Inn, I doubt very much if you look upon the hungry, the sick, the abused, or the homeless with envy. And yet, it is to them that Jesus tells us the kingdom of heaven belongs. They are the Blessed Be's the ones for whom Jesus has favor. But what about the Woe To's. What about the folks who are feeling fine, on top of the world, happy as a clam, comfortable and content in life. What message does Jesus have for them? Does he say, Good work, you go girl. Does he say at'ta boy. Does he say, I'm so proud of you and all you've accomplished? No, no, he doesn't say any of that stuff we think he should say. Instead he says,

Woe to you who are have a few bucks to spare, because this is as good as it gets for you.

Woe to you who had a big breakfast this morning, because you're gonna be starving at dinner and the fridge will be empty.

Woe to you with those silly smiles on your faces, don't get too used to them because tears are just around the corner.

Woe to you who are held in high regard and respected in the community, it won't be long until you topple from your pedestal.

What?!?! I don't know about you, but right now life is pretty sweet and I don't like being a Woe To. I mean, I like life really well right now and don't want to become like one of the Blessed Be's who gathered around Jesus for healing, but I don't much care for Jesus' forecast of the future. What does he mean, anyway? Are the Woe To folks going straight to hell in the next life just because we've enjoyed health, wealth, and comfort in this one? That hardly seems fair.

And yet, Jesus is anything but fair. And that's what the disciples must learn as they begin ministering with him. Up until that point, society had been based on apparent laws of fairness—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the belief that great wealth is a sign of God's favor on you because you worked hard—you know, that kind of nonsense. But to them, they who had not grown up with Christian ideals like love your neighbor as yourself and pray for your enemies and the first shall be last and the last shall be first—for the disciples and people in the crowds who were hearing all of this for the first time—they must have thought it even crazier than we sometimes do.

And so where does all of this leave the Woe To's? Should we give away all of our money and live in poverty? Should we let ourselves and those we love go hungry? Should we hang out in the waiting area of the emergency room until we contract some dread viral disease? Should we immerse ourselves in crisis and tragedy until we're so miserable that our eyes are forever veiled in tears? Should we become lazy and corrupt just so people won't hold us in high regard? Are these the only ways for the Woe To's to become blessed people?

To find the answer I turned to many a Biblical scholar. And their conclusion? Most of them said very much about what it means to be a Blessed Be and very little about what it means to be a Woe To. But Robert Tannehill, a leading scholar on the Gospel according to Luke, wrote the following about the Woe To's.

It may seem strange that the rich are treated so roughly here, but there is an underlying conviction that those who hoard what the poor need are held responsible before God. The woes would seem to say that there is no hope for the rich, but later teaching about riches in Luke will show that this is not entirely true. There is a possibility of repentance for the rich, although the way of discipleship will be costly. (Robert C. Tannehill, Luke, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, 115-116)

And I suppose that is the message the Woe To's are to take from Luke this morning. If one is blessed with wealth in this life, one must be willing to put it towards the cause of discipleship—which is, in every way and with everything, costly. And the Woe To's must be willing to give of their wealth so that the Blessed Be's will have the food, shelter, health care, education, and other resources they need in order to live. Jesus' message, over and over again in all of the gospels, is that until all are fed, all are sheltered, all are free, all are healthy, all have an opportunity for happiness, until that time comes—woe to the ones who postpone the coming of that time. Woe

to those who hoard, who are selfish, who do not share, and who sit on their wealth thinking they deserve it because they earned while others go hungry, cold, sick, and heartbroken. Is it fair for us to work our whole lives to have nice things and a comfortable lifestyle only to be asked to give much of it away to those who have not done the same? Is that fair? No. Is it what Jesus asks of us? Yes. And when the kingdom of God comes, we will understand that. And when we stand in judgment before the Lord and our lives are replayed for us, woe to us who let another suffer when we could have done something to prevent it. In this life, things are good for the Woe To's. But in the next, there will be a price to pay for greed and selfishness and indeed, woe to those folks on their judgment day. Because when we're standing there, when we finally have a perspective on what was really important in this life, and more importantly on what is important in the next, we're going to be kicking ourselves knowing we could have done something more to help and yet didn't because we wanted a fancy new car, a bigger house, nicer clothes, or a longer vacation. Thanks be to God for Jesus' life-altering message to the disciples we heard this morning. May those of us who are Woe To's in this crowd hear it and make the choice to heed it that we might be better disciples in this world, and more blessed in the next.

