

The trip I took the other week was with fellow clergy who are also fellow camp people. One of them has told a camp story so many times I feel like I was there, though I was not. During training her third or fourth year on staff, the director pulled aside a couple other returning staff members—not her, but a couple others—and instructed them to secretly stage an “opposite day” by doing their assigned tasks the wrong way to teach the rest of the staff how *not* to facilitate the camp program. After a long, bizarre day, one of the counselors who was in on the joke knelt during worship and began a lengthy, rambling, impassioned prayer for some obscure cause... and finally they lost it. Then they explained how all day they’d intentionally been doing the opposite of what they should have done. I don’t know if that taught anyone to be a better staff member; it certainly taught my friend not to trust that camp director. I wonder if Jesus’ disciples and the crowds who followed him ever expected him to announce that it was opposite day and that he’d just been joking in teaching them to look at the world in a way that must have seemed completely upside down.

In Matthew’s gospel it’s the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ but in Luke’s gospel, Jesus came down on a level place with his disciples and the crowds. We might hear in that geography the echo of the *Magnificat* from Luke’s first chapter, where Mary sings that the Lord *has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly*—which would put all people on a literal level field. We’ll also remember that Jesus nearly got thrown off a cliff for his sermon in Nazareth based on Isaiah’s prophetic words that he had been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and to set free the oppressed. With all that in the background, we shouldn’t be too surprised to hear Jesus say, *blessed are you who are poor, you who are hungry, you who weep, you who are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed...* nor should we be surprised to hear him say *uh-oh, you who are rich, you who are full, you who are laughing, you who are popular...* Yet if we were asked to count our blessings, I doubt we’d use Jesus’ math.

If we were to see someone—or be someone—who is poor (and not poor in spirit, as Matthew phrases it, but as Luke says, just regular poor); if we were to see someone or be someone who is hungry; if we were to see or be someone who is weeping or hated, excluded, reviled, or defamed, I doubt the first word we’d think of is “blessed” and I don’t think we’d leap for joy. Don’t we work and save and plan to try to make our way out of poverty? Don’t we stock the fridge so that we’re not hungry, or not hungry for long? Don’t we invest in our relationships and encourage each other to make good, healthy, safe choices so that we don’t end up weeping for lost love? And although it’s not realistic to think that everyone will like us, we don’t want people to hate us, or exclude us, or slander us behind our backs. Jesus calls us “blessed” for things we’re more likely to think of as curses. Then Jesus says, *woe—watch out* about a number of things which, if we honest, we’d probably like to be. I’m obviously not trying real hard to get rich, but I wouldn’t rip up a winning lottery ticket. I try not to be a glutton, but I stopped at Dunkin’ Donuts this morning. I mourn and weep enough; it’s a relief to laugh. And I can’t take a compliment, but I’d rather not be attacked, either.

Jesus' metrics are the opposite of what the disciples, the crowds, and we have been taught to expect. When we say that Jesus was radical or counter-cultural, this is what we mean: that he taught a value system that totally opposes the way the majority of people look at the world. As God incarnate, Jesus perfectly lived out God's will, yet he still ended up suffering on the cross. But somehow we think, if only in the back of our minds, way back behind our Lutheran training in grace alone, that if we can only live up to God's standards, we'll receive God's blessings—blessings like health, wealth, and happiness, not poverty, hunger, or sorrow. It didn't work that way for Jesus, but we're still conditioned to think if we try ever harder, we can earn our blessings—not because scripture tells us that, but because the world we live in keeps telling us that, even though it is in so many ways an empty promise.

If we look closely, we'll notice that these blessings and woes are not instructions; Jesus doesn't say *become poor*, or *start weeping*. And that is an important distinction. Jesus is not giving us a list of tasks or achievements with an eternal payoff in mind. He's speaking to us about who and what we are right now, because God cares about our lives that we're living right now. This and similar passages have been used and abused to perpetuate injustice and inaction: why bother working to eradicate poverty or hunger if Jesus says the poor and hungry are "blessed" and if God is going to sort it all out in the end, in the great hereafter. But Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God in the present—not yours *will be* the kingdom of God, but yours *is* the kingdom of God. We live in the kingdom when we trust God's way of life instead of trusting how the world tells us to live—even if the world's ways are working pretty well for us.

Through the blessings and the uh-ohs, Jesus asks us to take a good look at where we're putting our faith and trust. Is our sense of self coming from our financial security? Our enjoyment and satisfaction? Our social standing? If that's what we're relying on to define us, what happens when we make a bad investment, when our health takes a nosedive, when we run into someone we can't impress or befriend? On the other hand, if we can recognize that God is present with us during the lean times, the times when we feel empty, the times when we are sad or alone...then we already know the peace that passes understanding and the love of God that never ends. The world teaches us what benchmarks we have to meet to prove we have value; God help us if we think the only people God loves are the ones who have achieved those goals.

This is a pretty hard passage for us to hear if we find ourselves more on Jesus' woe list than Jesus' blessed list, and truthfully, compared to most other people throughout human history and a lot of other people in our world today, that's the list where we belong. It's hard to trust Jesus' vision when the world yells a different message, and frankly when we *want* the benefits that come from acting in our own self-interest. But what would it look like if we weren't striving so hard for things that in the end, don't really define us, if we weren't striving so hard at all? Might it free us to reach out, beyond ourselves, and be blessed to be the hands through which God blesses others?