

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, February 11, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 6:17-26

Now, off and on for months now, I've had some trouble with my voice. I've asked a few of you, and even once or twice in the congregation, I've asked during the prayer to pray for my voice. I seem to have trouble with it most Sunday mornings, and it's not because we're having yelling fights Saturday night. Caroline wasn't even home last night. It occurred to me that I need to be more specific. Someone may be praying, "Hope the preacher loses his voice! Hope the preacher loses his voice!" I want you to pray that I keep my voice. Let us pray.

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of every heart be acceptable to You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My title is "Blessings and Woes." There are so many corny old jokes that sort of go along the lines the way I read this Scripture. Good news, bad news. Some, they just go through my head, and through your head, too. One I threw out this morning, I think that just by the punch line, we know some of them. One of them is, you know, what is the bad news, and that is, you're pitching tonight. I think you know the whole joke, some of you. Maybe not. Maybe I'm the only one who knows that. The one that I'm going to tell that I really do like, the good news/bad news is an artist goes to a gallery where he has his paintings displayed, and he asks the gallery manager, "Has anybody shown any interest in my paintings?" The manager says, "Yes! We had a man in here who was asking me about them, and he asked did I think that the paintings would go up in value after you died. I said yes, that always happens, and he bought all 15 of your paintings." He said, "That's great news! That's great news! What is the bad news?" The gallery owner said, "Well, the man was your doctor." Good news, bad news.

There are blessings and woes in this Scripture. Imagine a preacher speaking to real people and starting a real sermon, not with any funny joke or humorous theme, but going straight into blessed are the poor, blessed are you when you're hungry, or even making it a little more up to date, blessed are you who are unemployed or blessed are you when you go through marital separation or blessed are you if you're ill or sick or in trouble or confused. I think that would get your attention, and you might think the preacher was crazy to say a person is blessed in these kinds of conditions! They would think the preacher was crazy. Now, we're so familiar with these words and we know Jesus said them so we just kind of let them go, but you now know, probably if you think about it, how many people saw Jesus. He's crazy! What is He talking about?!

The Beatitudes are fiercely focused, the blessings and the woes. They are partially in the woes about ego and self-worship. Self-worship is a curse, a curse that you bring upon yourself and bring upon everyone else who must suffer in the shadow of it. A funny saying that someone overhead once – I would not say that he is conceited, but he is absolutely convinced that if he had not been born, people would want to know why. That's conceited, self-absorbed, and that's a curse because the self-absorbed don't know that they need God. They don't know that they need others.

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God sends no one away empty says Dwight L. Moody, no one away empty except those who are full of themselves.

The Beatitudes are also about the blessing of worshiping God and knowing that without God we are nothing.

Mother Teresa, someone once said about her, that her secret is that she is free to be nothing. She is free to be nothing; therefore, God can use her for anything. The philosopher Kierkegaard said that Christianity has taken a giant stride into the absurd. Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it's altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them. These blessings and woes, if we pay attention to them beyond the familiar words, and think, “Is that the way we're supposed to look at life?” It wounds us, and it also offers healing.

I once volunteered at a downtown soup kitchen ministry at an Episcopal church in Durham, NC, and they fed street people in the basement, and then they worshiped a high formal liturgy in the beautiful sanctuary upstairs. That went on for a while. Street people in the basement, high formal liturgy upstairs, but after months of that going on, do you know what happened? These blessed poor people in the basement, and it's odd how sometimes we use blessed as a curse. That blessed dog tore into the garbage last night. That really happened. I don't mean it as a nice thing then. Well, anyway, these poor people who were in the basement finally they wandered upstairs, street stink and ragged, full of soup and hope. They could not be satisfied with half a Gospel, and it caused trouble. We gotta be careful in this church and whatever church. If you take Jesus seriously, other people might think you mean it.

We like to be the blessed and we like to be a blessing, but where are we in Jesus' sermon this morning? He says woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full now, woe to you who are laughing now, woe to you when all speak well of you. That's woe to just about everyone sitting in this church this morning. Now, I don't think of myself as wealthy. I don't, but then I ask myself, would the bank allow a poor man to be in the kind of debt that I'm in? I must be wealthy! They know better than I do.

Blessed are the meek. If you're in sales or administration anywhere, try being meek at work and see how far you get. Meekness is fine for church. It's fine for Sunday school. In the real world, meek can send you home early with a pink slip and a pat on the back.

Thornton Wilder wrote a short story, “Heaven Is My Destination.” It's a comedy about a poor soul who attempts to put the Beatitudes into practice, and the results of his piety are predictably disastrous. The results of his piety are that he causes a run on the bank because he refuses to accept interest on his savings. He thinks that's usury and he shouldn't accept it, and other people overhear him refusing to accept interest on his savings. They think there's something wrong at the bank. They make a run on their

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bank, and demand all their money, and the bank crashes. The implication is that if you really try to live the Beatitudes, it will be either a comedy or a tragedy depending upon how you look at it.

People want things to make sense, and they try to put it into boxes what happens in their lives and what happens to other people around them and what happens in the news. People want logic and reason and justification for why they have it good and other people have it bad. People also want credit for the good in their lives, and they want to blame God and others for the bad. It is not that simple.

You may remember from the Gospel of John, they brought a man one time to Jesus, who had been born blind, and they asked Jesus who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind. Do you remember Jesus' answer? He said neither one, neither one, but God's glory will be revealed in this man, and Jesus healed him, and later on they were interrogating the man, and they asked him what happened, and he simply said, "I don't know. I just know I was blind and now I can see."

You will see in the Bible in places in the Old Testament, and you may even see in your conversation at lunch today, how people talk about that horrible thing happened and this horrible thing happened, you know, they must have done something. They must have done something to bring it on themselves or they must have done something so that God is punishing them. That's not what Jesus is preaching here.

When I did mission work in South Africa, there were Christians so called, thank goodness they were not Methodists, who believed that the poor Zulu were poor because God wanted them poor, and that it might even be against God's will to help them. So they believed. They thought, we are rich. We must be blessed. They are poor. They must be cursed and that's the way God wants it. There's nothing for us to do.

I read a sermon once, pre-Civil War, from a man named Thornwell, a famous South Carolina Presbyterian preacher, and he defended slavery with much the same logic. He said, "Africans are enslaved because God wills them to be enslaved. It is for their own good, and it's better here than in Africa! That's a blessing. It raises the status of white women above menial labor, so it's good for women." He concluded that it would be a sin to set them free.

Blessings and woes are not that simple. It is convenient for the rich to believe that the poor are poor because God wants them to be poor, isn't it? The word that Luke uses for poor is a Greek word "ptochos" and it means one who works and works and works but still has nothing and is reduced to begging in near hopelessness of ever getting ahead.

When I was a teenager living in the country between Woodruff and Spartanburg, I knew of a situation where there was a family, who was essentially an indentured servant, almost a slave, to the man who owned the house. They lived in the house. The rent was way too high. They got behind every month, and they had to work for the man to pay off

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the rent. They just got more and more behind every month. He essentially owned them. They couldn't leave. They were *ptochos*. They were hopeless, but working hard and never, ever, getting ahead.

It's convenient for the rich to believe the poor are poor because God wants them to be poor. It is convenient to believe that the sins of children are always the fault of parents.

I remember trying that once. My parents divorced when I was 12, and I got in some pretty bad trouble, and I came home late one night, too late, past curfew, in trouble, and I tried pulling that. Well, you know, I'm upset because y'all got divorced. My mother started crying, and she said, "Well, Jim, you know, maybe that's true." My dad said, "Cut the ---! Give me the keys!"

It is not always the fault of parents when young people get in trouble. Maybe even Boy Scouts get in trouble sometimes, and it might be their fault. It is convenient to believe that a failed business or failed health is always the fault of an individual or a punishment from God. Some seem to think that way all through the Old Testament. I want to make this clear. That is not a Christian attitude. That is not the teaching of Jesus Christ. Yes, we're responsible for our behavior, but sometimes things happen beyond our power and beyond our control. Sometimes what the world thinks is a blessing, such as beauty and fame and wealth, turn out to be a curse.

I know you all saw the news last week. You note the death of Anna Nicole Smith. Was wealth and fame and beauty really a blessing?

Jesus was certainly a blessing, and He was blessed in that He was completely filled with the very essence of God, the spirit of God. From His conception, He was the Son of God. We say in the mystery of the Trinity that Jesus was God in flesh, and yet in His flesh, He suffered rejection and temptation and even fear of death just as we do. He was blessed, and He was a blessing, and yet His life was not charmed and filled with fame and wealth and beauty, which the world seems to demand from its celebrities and important people. God is always offering us the blessing of hope in Jesus Christ, the blessing of love and life from God the Father, and the blessing of comfort and companionship and guidance from God the Holy Spirit. Sometimes though we may be, or feel that we are, too poor or too sick or too stressed to receive it. Sometimes we may be too rich or too well or too self-satisfied to see it. When we are successful and healthy and wealthy in worldly terms, all too often we forget about God's grace. We forget about God's blessings and our need of them. We think we can make it on our own. We think that we have made it on our own. Either way, we think we don't need God.

When we get over ourselves, and I learned that from my kids as they were growing up, when we get over ourselves, we come to understand that we are blessed and that joy comes from being a blessing in Jesus' name to others. Then our life begins for real, not pretending to feel blessed, not pretending to care, but knowing that God loves me. God loves me, even the sinner that I am, and so now I have something to share. I can love

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others. It's that simple. It's that counter cultural. It is that out of the mainstream, this Gospel of ours.

We're not blessed for our own sakes. We are blessed to be able to give and to be a blessing to others. You know, the poorest people whom I have met have been the most generous.

I know a missionary who went to Haiti several years back, and they stayed with a family that had an entire livestock of two chickens. There were 12 in the mission team, and they killed one-half of their whole livestock! One-half of their livelihoods! They killed one of those chickens, and gave 1/12 of it to each of the team members, and they ate nothing. I'm told that the team members who were there wept as they ate that chicken.

I experienced the same sort of generosity from the poor Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa. When we were building them a new church, they stopped every day around 10:30 and they gave us high tea and little bitty sandwiches. There was no electricity. They had to use wood fires, and the women had to carry in the water from far off. They had these chipped, but formerly fine china sets to give us this high tea. We tried to tell them no, no, no, no, we're Americans, we don't stop at 10:30. We don't stop for high tea. We don't need this. Their faces were fallen, and the English Methodist Bishop there told us that these people, don't insult these people. They feel blessed that you are here building them a church even though it's just cement block church, and they want to return and give you some small thing, and show their thankfulness. Please accept their blessings. So we did.

The poor, the desperately poor don't seem to cling to possessions as much as the wealthy. They don't have as many. They understand that love and faith are lived out in relationship. Their life is not just about keeping your stuff safe and getting more stuff. Wealth and riches can really insulate you from a relationship.

My daughter gave me an article that I read, which said that children who grow up on cul de sacs don't have as developed social skills as other children, who live in open neighborhoods. Now, some of you live on cul de sacs. Don't raise your hands. That's just what the study said, not what I'm saying.

It is true that relationships in neighborhoods are not the same as they used to be when we had backyard clotheslines and people talked over the clotheslines or people went to washeterias. Now, that we have dryers, washers, everything delivered, heating and air, windows always closed, we may live in a neighborhood for decades and not even know who our neighbors are. Riches and wealth insulate us from relationships. Extreme wealth can create situations where you don't even know who your friends are because you may have friends who hang around just to bask in the light of your status. Riches aren't necessarily a blessing and being poor is not necessarily a curse from God.

The Beatitudes call us to get beyond these categories. They call us rich and poor alike, well and sick alike, successful and struggling, popular and shunned, to look to the God of

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blessing for strength, and for the way and the meaning and the life revealed in Jesus Christ. It's in our relationship with God and with others that true blessing can be found. Being public about your relationship and these values that seem so upside down with our culture, being public with your Christian faith can cost you much, much more today than it did in previous generations.

We don't hear much about it, but persecution is a problem for Christians in China, in Vietnam and North Korea, in Indonesia, in Egypt, in Saudi Arabia, in India, and in too many countries to list, and becoming more of a problem on some college campuses and even in America. Christians are suffering in parts of the world and dying every day for their faith. To those people, Jesus said blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and when they revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy for surely your reward is great in Heaven for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. It's difficult to be a Christian in many parts of the world, and it can be difficult here, too. Sometimes the compromises that people ask you to make are huge.

How would you have liked to have been an accountant at Enron? Most of us are familiar with that huge scandal there. Being told to get with the program, believe in the shell game, and support a company doing questionable things. Someone needed to blow the whistle, and some did, but most just kept adding the numbers and collecting the paychecks and protecting their pensions. The world says woe if you're a whistle blower, and God says blessed when you do what is good and right. Good and right have become almost categories that we pretend don't exist anymore! Scouting is one of those organizations, which does talk about honesty, integrity, discipline, and right and wrong, and I'm glad of it. It's an adjunct to the Christian teaching in my mind.

Woe to you if you have been rich, you have received your consolation, if you believe that riches are the sum total of who you are. Woe to you if you are full now and ignore those around you and have no compassion for those who hunger, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, derisively or contentedly with no concern for those who weep, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. All these woes imply an attitude that you do not need God, that you are self-centered and adequate on your own. The poor and the outcast know that need God for every day and for their daily bread – even for their daily existence. It takes for most of us an extreme crisis to make us understand that we need God.

Most of us, or at least our culture does, echoes the modern philosopher, Eric Hoffer. He says, “Faith to move mountains is not necessary when the technology to move mountains is available.” That's what he says, and a lot of us echo that.

As I close, I want to quote from an obituary that was written about a man whose name I don't even have, but it's an obituary. John Jones is his name. It reads like this. The other day in Emporia, the longest funeral procession that has formed in ten years

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followed John Jones three long miles in the hot July sun out to Dry Creek Cemetery. The reason so many people lined up behind the hearse that held the kind old man’s mortality was simple. They loved him. He devoted his life to people. In a very simple way without money or power, he gave of the gentleness of his heart to all around him. We are apt to say that money talks, but it speaks a broken, poverty-stricken language. Hearts talk better, clearer, and with a wider intelligence. This old man with the soft voice and the kindly manners knew the tongue of the heart, and he spoke it where it would give zest to joy and life. He worked manfully and with a will in his section of the vineyard, and against odds and discouragements, he won time and again. He was infinitely patient and brave. He held a simple old-fashioned faith in God and His loving kindness. When others gave money, which was of their store, he gave prayers and hard work and inspired courage. He helped. He helped.

Only those who know their desperate need for help from God can know how blessed they are in Jesus Christ. Our response is our Christian faith, overflowing with thanksgiving for what God has done for us, not what we have done for ourselves, but what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We are simply called to be a blessing in His name, not to follow the standards of the world, but to follow the standards of the Kingdom of God. We have been blessed. Be a blessing. Amen.