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February 17, 2019  
Luke 6:17-26

“Everything Happens For a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved” is the title of a book published last year that garnered some buzz in preacher circles. The author is Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School who is a scholar of the prosperity gospel. In fact, Bowler wrote a history of the prosperity gospel in a book titled “Blessed”. For those of you have never heard of the prosperity gospel, it’s the belief that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith. The prosperity gospel is championed by people like Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer, and prior to them could be heard in the preaching of Jim and Tammy Faye Baker.

The modern prosperity gospel, according to Bowler, can be directly traced to the turn-of-the-century theology of a pastor named E. W. Kenyon, whose evangelical spin on New Thought taught Christians to believe that their minds were powerful incubators of good or ill. Christians, Kenyon advised, must avoid words and ideas that create sickness and poverty; instead, they should repeat: “God is in me. God’s ability is mine. God’s strength is mine. God’s health is mine. His success is mine. I am a winner. I am a conqueror.”

Bowler spent 10 years interviewing televangelists with spiritual formulas for how to earn God’s miracle money. She held hands with people in wheelchairs being prayed for by celebrities known for their miracle touch. She sat in people’s living rooms and heard about how they never would have dreamed of owning their home without the encouragement they heard on Sundays. The general idea behind all this thinking goes something like this: if you believe hard enough, God will grant you favors. Or, as prosperity believers summarized it for Bowler, “God will bless you.”

One of the prosperity gospel’s greatest triumphs is its popularization of the term “blessed.” Now, don’t get me wrong, blessed **can be** an expression of pure gratitude, as in “Thank you, God. I could not have secured this for myself.” But it can also imply that it was deserved. “Thank you, me. For being the kind of person

who gets it right. Who believes hard enough and works hard enough to make it so.”

The prosperity gospel is a very American gospel. It’s a gospel that celebrates a “can do attitude”. That believes if you work hard enough, you’ll pull yourself up by your bootstraps. That purchases 19 million copies of “The Secret” and “How to Win Friends and Influence People”. It weaves its way into self-help psychology and Oprah’s “aha” moment. And it’s summed up in Oprah saying, “Nothing about my life is lucky. Nothing. A lot of grace. A lot of blessings. A lot of divine order.”

The prosperity gospel believes beauty, power, achievement and fame are signs of a blessed life. And we’ve bought into that hook, line and sinker.

But the problem is the American prosperity isn’t a very Christian gospel. In fact, scripture tells us just the opposite:

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

*Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

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

That’s what Jesus said, and if we’re honest we’ll admit it’s confusing, because few people give thanks for poverty, hunger or grief.

This does not sound like good news to people like me who are neither poor nor hungry. In fact, it’s rather troubling news and news I would rather not hear.

But hear it I must.

Just before our story opens for today, Jesus had spent the evening praying on top of a mountain, and in the morning he assembled the 12 apostles for the very first time. After that, they came down the mountain together and there, on level ground, a great crowd surrounded them. They came from all over: Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They came to hear him and to be cured of their ailments; and they were healed! “Power comes out from him”, Luke tells us.

Jesus takes this opportunity to address his 12 apostles; he speaks to them openly and within earshot of the great crowd, and proclaims to them who is truly

blessed. And he warns those who do not follow his way that their lives will be woeful.

But how terrible for you who are rich,  
because you have already received your comfort.

25 How terrible for you who have plenty now,  
because you will be hungry.

How terrible for you who laugh now,  
because you will mourn and weep.

26 How terrible for you when all speak well of you.  
Their ancestors did the same things to the false prophets.

What? This isn't right. You get ahead by being successful, which means rich and beautiful! You don't get ahead by being poor!

Isn't that what the American gospel has taught us? It has.

But here's Jesus, challenging, head on, the values and ethical structures of our world. Here's Jesus turning the world upside down. Discipleship is radical, Jesus said; it's not what you expect. God demands your all. Everything. The entirety of your lives.

It's a radical message, friends. Is it any wonder we've sanitized it, watered it down, spiritualized it, and turned it into something comfortable? Yet here Jesus is, jarring us out of our faithful complacency and challenging us to reverse the social order – an order that benefits us! Here Jesus is telling us to right the economic and political injustices so that we can get right with God. We . . . the ones who the world says are blessed!

So where does that leave us? Those of us who are considered blessed by the world's standards? Well, it's really quite simple. If the target of Jesus' ministry is people who are vulnerable, or hurt, or under siege, then our discipleship should take on a distinctive hue, it should reflect Jesus' priorities. We should be people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and our actions should reflect that. And if they don't, there's a problem. Woe unto us!

I mean, just ask yourselves:

1. Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do I look the other way?

2. Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do I assume someone else will?
3. Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do I explain away my perceived indifference because I don't want to people to think I take sides, because I choose to play it safe?
4. Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness or keep silent so as not to offend or not to disappoint, in fear of not meeting expectations?

Friends, the Beatitudes are a call to action to create the world God imagines. They're a call to action to make Jesus present and visible when the world tries to silence those who speak the truth. We need the reminder to hunger and thirst for righteousness when the world actively works against it, overrides it, sidelines it, monetizes it, limits it, or assumes its overrated or overstated.

And never underestimate your ability to create the world God imagines, because we're all called to follow and serve. All of us. We're given different gifts to create that world, but all of us have gifts. As Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Jesus may have addressed his words to his 12 disciples, but his words reach across time and space and geography to us today, exhorting us to think differently and act differently so that God's vision can become reality.

Some of you may remember the "Think Different" ad campaign Apple did 20 years ago. It channeled the idea that one person can make a difference. In an interview Steve Jobs said, "When you grow up you tend to get told the world is the way it is and your life is just to live your life inside the world. Try not to bash into the walls too much. Try to have a nice family life, have fun, save a little money.

That's a very limited life. Life can be much broader once you discover one simple fact, and that is — everything around you that you call life, was made up by people who were no smarter than you. And you can change it, you can influence it, you can build your own things that other people can use.

The minute that you understand that you can poke life . . . that you can change it, you can mold it . . . that's maybe the most important thing. It's to shake off this

erroneous notion that life is there and you're just gonna live in it, versus embrace it, change it, improve it, make your mark upon it.

I think that's very important and however you learn that, once you learn it, you'll want to change life and make it better, cause it's kind of messed up, in a lot of ways. Once you learn that, you'll never be the same again."

And so Jobs created the "Think Different" campaign.

"Here's to the crazy ones.

The misfits.

The rebels.

The troublemakers.

The round pegs in the square holes.

The ones who see things differently.

They're not fond of rules.

And they have no respect for the status quo.

You can quote them, disagree with them,  
glorify or vilify them.

About the only thing you can't do is ignore them.

Because they change things.

They push the human race forward.

While some may see them as the crazy ones,  
we see genius.

Because the people who are crazy enough to think  
they can change the world, are the ones who do.

Friends, to live the Beatitudes is to "live different" as one of the true "crazy ones."

It's to see the world and people as Jesus sees it. Jesus urges his disciples – then and now – to look at those around us differently than the culture does. Rather than measure persons by their possessions, we are invited to see their character. Rather than merely take pity on their losses, we are invited to enter into them. Rather than judge their failings, we are invited to forgive.

Because the Beatitudes point us to who Jesus really is. Perhaps not the Jesus you want. Perhaps the Jesus who likely rubs you the wrong way. Perhaps the Jesus that tells you the truth about yourself. The Jesus who reminds you, at the most inconvenient times and places, what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about. And to see the world as God imagines it and wants it to be. Because the Beatitudes point us to who Jesus really is and what God really wants. And so may we work for that world.

“Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Amen.

Sources:

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