

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of our weekly rituals at the church staff meeting on Tuesdays are notecards. We send them to people to thank them for things they have done or to celebrate an important event in their lives.

We also send them out of care and concern to those who are sick or have suffered a death in their family that was especially difficult.

And so as we meet, the notecards are circulated around the table and the staff has an opportunity to share words of comfort or encouragement.

After reading our gospel for today at last Tuesday's staff meeting, the staff decided that we needed a new approach to our card writing.

We realized that we had things all backwards.

So, we changed our style. To a person who recently lost their job, PD wrote: How blessed are you! I am so excited for you and your family's good fortune.

May God continue to pour abundant grace upon your life.

To a high-schooler inducted into the National Honor Society, Dan Burriss wrote: I am so sorry to hear about this tragic event in your life. May God bring you comfort in the days ahead no matter what others may say about you. To a person who has suffered a terrible loss I wrote:

What a gift God has given you! May you enjoy this time in your life and feel God's richest blessings upon you.

I hope you realize by now that I have made this whole scenario up.

If any of us on staff had written something like this in a card we should rightly be run out of town. But it does beg the question, exactly what did Jesus mean when he speaks of the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and the reviled as blessed while the rich, the full, the happy and well-admired are delivered woes?

It makes you wonder about Jesus. What does it mean to be blessed?

What is it to suffer woe?

When good things happen to me I consider myself blessed.

To have a roof over my head, income, food on the table,  
friends who care for me and respect me as a person, a loving family  
– All these are blessings in my book.

And I know that they are blessings from God.

That's pretty clear in my mind. Yet Jesus states  
that these blessings under some circumstances can become woes for us.

Then Jesus has a list of all of the things I would totally avoid if I could:  
poverty, hunger and longing of any kind, heartfelt sorrow and grief,  
living as an outcast – hated and defamed because of my belief.

I'm sure if we put a sign-up for this on the Wittenberg Wall  
there would be a stampede at the end of our worship service  
with all of you rushing out there, pens in hand, to put your name  
on the list. Ooh, ooh sign me up first.

Jesus, this is what you call blessing?

What kind of sadistic God is this who labels our suffering as a gift?

God must have a different definition of blessing  
than my own. Otherwise none of this makes any sense.

Jesus came down with the twelve and stood on a level place,  
with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people.

They had come to hear him and to be healed. And all in the crowd  
were trying to touch him, for power came out from him  
and healed all of them.

To skip over these lines and go straight to the blessings and the woes  
is to miss a critical piece of the reading. These people were with Jesus.  
They were hanging on his every word. They were pressing in,  
trying to touch him for they felt his power  
and knew that he had healed them.

They received Jesus' blessing for they were with him.

Jesus was there. The kingdom of God had come to them in him.

To be blessed is to be with Jesus.

And to this crowd of disciples and others Jesus also spoke of woes as warnings. Woe comes to those who cling to something else other than God. If we place our trust, all of our hopes or all of our attention on material wealth or financial security or even on important relationships in our life, these blessings can become woes if we lose sight of God. True joy is found only in Jesus and obediently following him. If we place our trust in anything else besides God we sin and bring woe upon ourselves. Blessing and trusting in God go hand in hand.

As you and I go about our day to day life we encounter coworkers, classmates, neighbors, family members who suffer. A person seemingly in the prime of their struck down by illness. Someone with a significant relationship that has shattered into a million pieces right before their eyes. A person whether with hardship or grief is just struggling to get by. As disciples standing in that crowd with them, Jesus reaches out to them through us and touches them. He extends his hand of blessing upon their lives.

In the midst of their suffering, we point to Jesus & he offers them hope. In Jesus there is a peace here for you that nothing in this world can touch. In Jesus there is God's compassion and comfort for you who weep. In Jesus, there is courage here for you no matter what your diagnosis. In Jesus there is welcome and love and acceptance here for you that drowns out all the hate and ridicule others can muster.

The blessing is that Jesus walks with you through the storm. He is with you and will be all that you need.

As disciples standing in the crowd, Jesus also warns us about the things that can move us away from God's blessing.

Jesus warns us about the things that can lure us away from him.

If we do not handle our riches carefully they can get in the way of our following our Lord. When I have money in the bank and all of my needs are met and life is good, I can be misled and think that I am self-sufficient, that I can take care of myself all on my own. I am not as deeply aware of my complete reliance on the mercy and blessing of God as I am when I am struggling.

The more riches you and I have, the more responsibility we have upon our shoulders to be good stewards of what God has given us. The more you and I are given, the more God calls upon us to help others who are in need.

Most of us here, including myself, live in north Raleigh. According to the statistics, the zip codes of the communities surrounding us are one of the most affluent areas in the state. For the most part, we live very well here. We are rich. I am proud of Good Shepherd and how we reach out to our surrounding community giving of ourselves and our talents and the ministries that we generously fund.

But, man, I wonder, I really wonder what would happen if we truly took Jesus' words to heart. If everyone at Good Shepherd gave of themselves and their riches at the level that I think we could, I wonder what incredible ministry Jesus would do through us?! Who else in the crowd of people surrounding him would Jesus then be able to reach? What more could we do?

These words of Jesus to us today come to us as both blessing and challenge. For Jesus is here. He is here in the faces of your brothers and sisters in Christ. He is here in his Holy Word. He comes among us in the Peace that we share as a community. He comes to us in the words of song as we raise our voices and praise his name. As we gather at this table, our Lord Jesus welcomes us

as the host of the meal and feeds us on his own body and blood.

Jesus is here. Strain your ears to hear his voice.

Stretch out your hand in this crowd of people  
who have gathered around Jesus to touch him  
for power is coming out from him to heal us all.

And whether life is going well for you or not on this day,

Jesus asks you to place your complete trust in him.

Trust him with your struggles. Trust him with all that you have.

Trust him with your very lives.

And in doing so, we are amazingly blessed.

How is Jesus calling you to trust in him?