

*Woe to Us**

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

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I.

A few weeks ago, eight of us from this community attended an evening Bible study at a church in Budapest. The Bible study group was a wonderful mix of ages, vocations, gender, sexual preference, and theological convictions. As the pastor introduced us to the church, she made clear that this church had a reputation as perhaps the most open and welcoming congregation among the Reformed Churches in Budapest.

Then she passed out English Bibles and announced that the text for discussion was, in fact, the text I just read, the Gospel text assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary for next Sunday. She led us through a careful study of Luke's beatitudes:

Blessed are you who are poor, for God's kingdom is yours.

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

Blessed are you who weep, for you will laugh.

The whole group entered into a lively discussion with active participation from Columbia Seminary students. What was the relationship between faith and blessedness? Were these promises to be understood historically or eschatologically?

All of us were clear that Matthew's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has a more spiritual view of blessedness. In Luke's telling of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, the issue is not being poor in spirit, but being poor; not hungering for righteousness, but being hungry; not eschatological mourning, but the grief produced by stunning violence and awful death. And all of us were clear that the mission of the church—in Hungary and the United States as well— included that dimension that is so essential to Luke's Gospel: good news to the poor.

And then, just as our time was running out, the pastor said, "Perhaps we'd better look at the last part of the passage." And there it was:

Woe to you who are rich; you've had what you're going to get.

Woe to you who are full; hunger is coming;

Woe to you who laugh because you will mourn.

One of the group, a nurse at a pediatric hospital, said something in Hungarian, and all the Hungarian folk nodded. The Pastor translated: "Luisa said that at this church, we love the beatitudes and ignore the woes."

II.

Us, too. It's hard enough to muster the courage to preach about God's preferential

* This sermon was preached in Columbia Theological Seminary's chapel on February 6, 2007.

option for the poor—how much harder to risk saying a few words about God’s preferential annoyance at the rich—at us. Most of us are stuck not just with the original sin attributed to Adam, but with the original sin that comes with being American and middle class. We are complicit from the day of our birth to the day of our death—from our insurance covered births to our very expensive deaths. And the hard fact, sisters and brothers, is that the only way we can take the blessing of this passage seriously is to think seriously about the Woes as well. I hope there’s a better world a’coming, not just in the hereafter, but in the here, and I know that a better world for the many will mean a more modest world for the few—for me and my family, too.

Some years ago when I was a pastor near the University of Chicago, the lectionary handed me a text from Amos, as tough as the text from Jeremiah we just heard. I wrote a pointed sermon reminding the members of my congregation that they lived in middle class and upper middle class wealth in a tiny little section of the city surrounded on three sides by poverty and on the fourth side by Lake Michigan.

It was a stunning sermon. As I sat at the typewriter (this was a long time ago), my adrenaline surged with righteous indignation.

Then I made a risky move. I showed the sermon to my wife, Carol Bartlett. “And where do you live?” she said. “And how many Rockefellers exploited how many workers to build your splendid Baptist pension fund?” I shifted the sermon. Instead of speaking for the prophet, I tried to listen to the prophet.

III.

I’m listening still. And it’s still hard. All things considered, I’d always rather stop with the beatitudes and skip the woes. Two things have helped a little bit in the years of my ministry—each a gift from a kind of mentor. The first mentor was James Gustafson, the Christian ethicist and theologian. He sat weekly in that congregation where I preached on Amos, and if my spouse hadn’t gotten me on Saturday, he would have gotten me on Monday.

Gustafson had sat through yet one more seminary conversation about how the mainline church was losing power and authority and how we longed for the good old days when the local newspaper covered the sermon and clergy got discounts at the department store.

“Listen to yourselves,” he said in his most pastoral way. “Don’t you know that week after week you get to speak about the gospel to the people who can help to change the world?” “Listen,” he was saying, “Words still have power. When you preach good news to the marginalized, you are also preaching good news to the powerful—tough news, but good news. Things can change. People can help.”

The other mentor was William Sloane Coffin whose sermons I heard regularly for several years. I don’t remember the sermon, but I remember the illustration. It was from Arthur Miller’s *Incident at Vichy*, and it was the dialogue between a French officer who had collaborated with the Nazis and a friend who had been part of the resistance. The collaborator was going on and on with his own version of the woes. “Woe is me for this and shame on me for that.” Finally, the resister had had enough: “I don’t want your guilt,” he said. “I want your responsibility.”

That’s the word, sisters and brothers. If this word from Luke’s gospel makes us feel guilty, that doesn’t much help. If the word from Luke makes us feel responsible, then it’s good news indeed.

Woe to us. Blessing to us, too.