

**Woodbury UMC
February 16, 2025
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26
“Blessed Are the Poor?”**

**Jumbo Shrimp. Minor Crisis. Virtual Reality. Awfully Good. Unbiased Opinion.
Bitter Sweet. Small Crowd. Seriously Funny.**

What do all these word combinations have in common?

**They are classified as “oxymorons.” Which, according to Webster’s Dictionary is a
“combination of contradictory or incongruous words.”**

**In the 12,00 or so words Jesus speaks in the gospel of Luke (no I did not count them
all) he does not use any of these or other oxymorons. He does speak words, however,
that could be classified as contradictory.**

“Love your enemies.”

“Do good to those who hate you.”

**All who exalt themselves will be humbled. And those who humble themselves will be
exalted.”**

“The first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

**He tells stories of undeserved forgiveness and love, like the story of a shunned father
who runs out to greet his prodigal son and before he has a chance to throw himself
on the mercy of his father, the father welcomes him home and throws him a party to
celebrate.**

He speaks the words we heard read for us this morning, “Blessed are the poor.”

**These are just a few of the words of Jesus that seem to be in contrast to the
prevailing thoughts of the day. Thoughts not all that different from those that seem
to prevail today.**

“Might makes right.”

“Look out for number one.”

“Whoever has the most wins.”

“If I have the right that makes it right.”

**Blessed are the rich,
Blessed are the educated,
Blessed are the assertive, for they shall get what they want.
Blessed are those who satisfy their needs.**

The word “blessed” comes from the Greek word *makarios* which may also be translated as “happy.” In fact, late Robert Schuller, long-time pastor of the Crystal Cathedral, wrote a book about the beatitudes titled *The Be Happy Attitudes*.

But I don’t think Jesus is speaking about happiness in the way that we do. For us happiness has come to mean “feeling good.” It is more often than not directly connected to our circumstances at the moment. In that sense it is hard to image that the poor, the hungry, or those that weep would be “happy.”

James Howell in his book *The Beatitudes for Today* writes,

“Blessed” really means “wonderful news,” and it is God’s wonderful news. God is acting now through Jesus to turn the world upside down. God has come down to help those who are under no illusion that they can help themselves. So to be “blessed” isn’t catchy advice on how to go and be happy; rather, “blessed” is being swept up in God’s decisive movement in the world. ‘It’s about something that’s starting to happen, not a general truth of life. It is gospel: good news, not good advice.’”

But regardless of how one understands the word blessed, where is the blessing in poverty, be it physical or spiritual poverty? Philip Yancey in his book *The Jesus I Never Knew* suggests the following:

- 1. The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption.**
- 2. The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people but also their interdependence with one another.**
- 3. The poor rest their security not on things but on people.**
- 4. The poor have no exaggerated sense of their own importance, and no exaggerated need of privacy.**
- 5. The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation.**
- 6. The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries.**
- 7. The poor can wait, because they have acquired a kind of dogged patience born of acknowledged dependence.**
- 8. The fears of the poor are more realistic and less exaggerated, because they already know that one can survive great suffering and want.**

9. When the poor have the Gospel preached to them, it sounds like good news and not like a threat or a scolding.
10. The poor can respond to the call of the Gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything.

Despite these “advantages” to being poor, I think most of us would rather take our chances with being rich.

This also despite the fact that Jesus said the following about being rich: *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”*

And elsewhere,

“Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

And being rich is not the guarantee of happiness that many people have come to believe.

In 1988, William Post won \$16.2 million in the Pennsylvania lottery but later ended up living on only his Social Security. Post's former girlfriend sued him for a share of his winnings and one of his brothers was arrested for hiring a hit man to kill him, hoping to inherit a share of the winnings. His relationship with his other siblings was also strained and he spent some time in jail. Within a year, he was \$1 million in debt and eventually declared bankruptcy. He ended up living on only \$450 a month and food stamps.

While the world speaks of the blessing of being rich, Jesus speaks of the blessing in being poor. This is the contradiction.

But it may not be as simple as an either-or proposition. Or that rich is bad and poor is good.

The First Letter to Timothy does not define wealth/money/being rich as evil, though the quote I often hear is that “money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

The actual verse reads “For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” This to me speaks of a quest of the heart. Not a quest to be rich, nor a quest to be poor. But rather a quest for contentment.

The author of the letter writes, “Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can’t take anything with us when we leave it. So, if we have enough food and clothing let us be content.”

This reminds me of the story of a man who was visited by an angel that told him that he was soon going to die. The man asked the angel if he could bring something with him. The angel said no, but the man was insistent. The man told the angel to go and speak with God, and to tell God that it was of extreme importance that he bring something with him to heaven. The angel pleaded the man’s case before God and returned to the man and told him that God had said he could bring one suitcase with him to heaven. So, the man found the biggest suitcase he could find and filled it with gold bars, because he was very rich. A short time later he died and went to heaven. When he arrived, he was met by God who asked what was so valuable that he needed to bring it to heaven. The man opened his suitcase and God looked in and said quite incredulously, “You brought pavement?!”

The man’s quest to be rich missed the mark. It focused on things that were earthly and temporal and not things that were truly eternal.

Does Jesus’ promise that “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” mean that poverty is the only place from which we can enter the kingdom of heaven?

I hope not, because if so, I’m out of luck. Because in the eyes of much of the world I am far from poor.

I think that Jesus is trying to help us to see things in a new way. And once we are able to do so, to see the possibilities that there can be blessings even when we are poor in the eyes of the world, we can begin to live in new ways.

That we can begin to live not so much in fear of poverty that we strive so hard to be rich in things that we are poor in relationships.

That we can begin to live not so concerned with caring for ourselves that we don’t look to God for anything and miss out on the life God offers.

That we can begin to live ways less conformed to the ways of the world so the ways of Jesus will become good news to our ears.

That we can begin to live as an example to a world that fails to see that care for those who are hungry, those who are thirsty, those in need of clothing, those who are sick or imprisoned is the way to take hold of the life that really is life.

The life that God desires for us.

A life that is rich in people and not in things.

A life where the poor are blessed.

Amen.