



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Blessed Impermanence”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Romans 11: 25-36; Luke 6: 17-26

You can always count on Paul to take what is already a complicated theological concept and make it borderline incomprehensible, and we could spend weeks on this passage, digging into the notions of election, and hardening, and sin, and everything in-between. The theme that runs underneath it all, however, and what sat on my heart as I looked towards our second reading that we will talk about in a bit, is that – whether we are talking about the Israelites, the Gentiles, or anyone else – what was is not what is, and that what is and not what will be. There is a blessed impermanence to it all, and hopefully some 20 minutes or so from now, you will know what I mean by that.

Stepping back, however, we’ve had a few at-home movie nights with our son Jay, recently, and a couple of them have ended up with him choosing what he considers ‘old’ movies that are from the era when Sharon and I were his age. In that vein, a few weeks ago, we watched *Back to the Future*. *Side note – if you want to date yourself in any way, allow me to remind you that Back to the Future was released 40 years ago this July!* Anyway, Jay enjoyed the movie enough that, last weekend, he and I had another movie night as we watched *Back to the Future 2*. It was somewhat humorous to watch that movie, with depictions of flying cars, hoverboards instead of skateboards, robotically automated restaurants, and holographic images all over the place, only to note that the ‘future’ to which they had travelled was actually now ten years ago – the year 2015. What I didn’t remember about that movie, however, was that it is tied directly to *Back to the Future 3* and, when you get to the end of *Back to the Future 2*, it actually concludes with this big banner across the screen that reads, ‘To Be Continued.’ As that came across the screen, Jay turned to me and said, ‘You don’t see that much anymore.’ And, that got me thinking.

In recent years I’ve had opportunities to watch movies or shows with the kids that, every once in a while, will end with some form of a cliffhanger, and it’s fascinating to watch how it drives them nuts! The notion of having to wait months, or maybe even a year, for the release of the next season, or movie, or whatever it is, literally unnerves them. Our daughter, Megan, was genuinely angry, for weeks, after one particular Marvel movie left everything hanging for a year before the next was released. Why? Because we just aren’t accustomed to that type of thing anymore.

In the culture and technology of today, we don’t wait for things. We’ve talked about this before. We are increasingly accustomed to the immediate resolution of whatever question, need, or challenge with which we may be confronted. From information to purchase deliveries, we don’t

wait for things anymore, a biproduct of which is that we are also less and less accustomed to sitting in that unresolved space that exists between. The days of waiting through the summer for the cliffhanger of the spring finale to be resolved in the fall season premier... or waiting weeks for the order from some catalog to be delivered... or even waiting until Monday morning for the library to open so that we can access the encyclopedias and look up who it was that invented the internal combustion engine... are all things of the past. We don't wait anymore, which means we don't sit in that indefinite void of anticipation anymore, which means we are less and less accustomed to resting in the uncertainty of the given moment and the anticipation of the change that is still to come. The reason our kids react so intensely to cliffhangers and things to be continued is that our cultural experience is such that we're just not good at waiting in the face of anything unclear or unknown. The challenge for us in that, however, and you've heard me say this before, is that what is is never what will be.

Let's look, for a moment, at our second reading for this morning. We talked a bit about this a few months ago, but bear with me. I think most in the room likely know the Beatitudes reasonably well – at least to some extent. Right at the outset of the Sermon on the Mount, in the fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins with that list of blessings proclaimed to those in difficult or unfortunate circumstances. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek...' The list goes on. Many of us know them – some likely had to memorize them in Sunday School or confirmation at some point along the way. What gets far less attention, however, is that we get pretty much the same thing from Jesus in the Sermon on the Plain in the sixth chapter of Luke's gospel. Starting in the 17th verse, Luke's Gospel tells us that...

He came down with them and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 22 "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

23 Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. (Luke 6: 17-23)

Now, I'm going to pause here for a second. Is this a different event than that which is described in Matthew? Is it the same event with details that have varied a bit through the game of telephone that was the oral tradition? We don't know. What we do know is that, up until this point, there's a lot of thematic crossover between the Beatitudes of Matthew and these Blessings here in Luke. So, why is it that Matthew tends to be the one we look at so much more often? It could be that it's a bit more poetic than Luke's words. Matthew's list is a bit longer and covers more territory, so that could play a role. In the end, however, I think that the reason Matthew's Beatitudes get all the attention is that Luke flips the coin and keeps going from the other side.

Picking up where we left off...

“But woe to you who are rich,” Jesus continues in verse 24, “for you have received your consolation. 25 “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.”

There are certainly other distinctions that play a role, but I honestly think that the primary reason for our focus on the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount over the Blessings and Woes from the Sermon on the Plain, is that we don't want to deal with the second half of that passage. We're all good talking about the blessings, but we don't want to deal with the woes. They feel so threatening... so harsh... so dark... especially in contrast to the words of hope that just preceded them. It's a lot easier and more comfortable to sit entirely in the blessings of the Beatitudes in Matthew than it is to wrestle with the rest of passage in Luke. The problem with ignoring them, however, is that I think it causes us to far too quickly lose sight of a more fundamental point that Jesus is making in those words from Luke's gospel.

It's easy, and inspiring, to lean into the blessings side of these words. Most of you have heard me say, repeatedly, that what is is not all that can and will be in and through the grace and love of God – that there's more to come. That's a message I share in various ways again and again, and it's something that bursts forth with clarity from those blessings that Jesus proclaims both in Matthew and in Luke. 'Blessed are the poor... Blessed are the hungry... Blessed are those who weep...' Why? Because that's not the end of the story. In God, there's more. We can lean into that one!

Suddenly, however, in this Sermon on the Plain, Jesus turns the tables and it feels almost as though he slams the light of hope down in front of us as the attention turns to those who for whom things are better – the rich... the full... the joyous... - and he starts proclaiming these 'woes' that make it sound like he's spitting in the face anyone who's happy. We read these two sets of statements and it comes across to us as though Jesus is trying to give joy to those who don't have it and steal joy from those who do. We don't know what to do with that.

The word that we translate as 'woe,' however, is the Greek word 'ouai,' and 'ouai' is, primarily, an exclamation of grief. And there's a key distinction in that meaning. These aren't words of threat, or punishment, or karmic retribution, or any of the other things we tend to read into them when we enter them in contrast to the blessings that precede them. These are statements of warning – I would argue even compassionate warning. This isn't a moment of Jesus turning away from the suffering – good – people he's been blessing over here to chastise the happy – evil – people over there. This is a moment of Jesus turning to those who are struggling and telling them that, in God, things can and will get better and then turning to those who are thriving and reminding them that their moments of suffering will come and that they, too, will be blessed by God's presence in the inevitable moments of sorrow that lay in front of them.

Jesus' point here is what I am referring to as 'blessed impermanence.' This isn't about trying to make one group feel good while trying to make another feel bad, this is about pointing out to all of them that the one constant is that what they know in the moment is not forever and that when the moment is less than ideal the blessing of the promises and hope of God remain.

As I was preparing for this service and looking for cover images for the worship order, I was taken by the irony and symbolism of the one that is on the cover this morning. The manner in which someone wrote 'forever' on the beach, just as the waves and tide were coming in to wash it away, was compelling to me. It's a reminder that 'forever,' or perhaps in the language I'm using this morning, 'permanency,' is a fallacy in the human experience. We've all heard that claim that the only constant in life is change. There's some truth to that, for sure. The point that Jesus makes in these words in Luke 6, however, is that the only constant in life is God!

We run away from these words from the Sermon on the Plain so quickly because we don't know what to do with the second half of that passage. We can readily and easily lean into the blessings, but we don't know what to do with the woes! Contrary to how we so often perceive them, however, these aren't words of threat, or punishment, or karmic retribution, or any of the other things we tend to read into them when we enter them in contrast to the blessings that precede them. These are statements of warning – I would argue even compassionate warning. This is a moment of Jesus turning to those who are struggling and telling them that, in God, things can and will get better and then turning to those who are thriving and reminding them that their moments of suffering will come and that they, too, will be blessed by God's presence in the inevitable moments of sorrow that lay in front of them.

Despite our cultural experience of wanting to know – now – what is coming, how things are going to resolve, or what the end is going to be, the reality is that our entire existence is one of impermanence. The moments we know are fleeting. The joyous and wondrous experiences will pass, and the struggles and strife will give way. In these crazy, wonderful, imperfect lives that we live, we will experience it all – that's gift and challenge of living. Jesus' point is not that we should be suffering. nor that we should worry when we are thriving. Jesus' point is that our suffering and thriving will fade, but that God will remain. Jesus' point is that all of our life experience is defined by impermanency, but that life's impermanency is blessed by the one constant that is God's presence and love in each and every one of those fleeting moments that we know.