

“Affirmative Vandalism”

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Luke 6:17-26

Very few of us are likely to make significant changes in our daily routines even after someone points out the benefits for us. Somehow it is easier to not worry about tomorrow by simply live for today. Jesus said something similar long ago in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, “*Blessed to you who make changes and woe to you who continue to live for today.*” Yet after hearing the blessings and the woes of Luke, I wish I was on the mountaintop with Matthew where there are only blessings for the disciples. But today we are with Jesus standing flat-footed, listening to the Sermon on the Plain, trying to decide if we will be blessed or challenged in our faith.

Jesus delivered the “blessings and woes” found in Luke 6 as a statement of fact:

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.

Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

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.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

These blessings and woes were not suggestions on how to improve our life. They are not a list of problems to be avoided. They were simply meant to be a congratulations or a lament for the way we live our lives.

Jesus spoke of the poor, the hungry, the weeping and rejected as those persons most faithful to God. The poor and the hungry in Jesus’ time placed their faith and trust in God for a day when justice would be served by God’s intervention.

Furthermore, the poor were the ones who were dependent on God and who were God's most faithful disciples.

On the other hand, the rich, full, laughing, and accepted were those who were self-sufficient and who were not faithful to God's call to life of discipleship, "Congratulations," Jesus seemed to say, "to all of you who have placed your trust in God, but woe to you who are satisfied and content with your life."

Robert Fulghum is my favorite author. In one book he wrote about how he likes to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. He is not Jewish but insists that he only celebrates the Spirit of it. This idea really spoke to me because as Fulghum points out, the church year does not run from January through December. Instead, it runs from September to September. By January 1 we are already in the middle of the cycle of living in the church.

Rosh Hashanah is a ten-day celebration which ends with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It was a time when the people were summoned for judgment and self-assessment, for repentance and self-improvement. At the center of this event is a sense of hope. You get your personal accounts squared away so that you can go on with life, with high expectation for another year – a better year – to come. And someday, next year perhaps, Jerusalem – the city of God on earth, with the Anointed one, the Messiah – will truly come.

Fulghum speaks of years past when he would plant daffodil bulbs on Rosh Hashanah, as a reminder to himself that hope for better times is not enough – that one must be an active participant in the quality of the future. If I want flowers for the future, the planting must be done now. One year he even planted an apple tree and strawberry starts, knowing full well that it would be quite some time before he would see flower or fruit. Hope and faith must be active verbs.

Even Fulghum's friend Willy and 6-year-old daughter Emily got into the act. They went to the store and bought a sack of hardy crocus bulbs and a bulb-planting tool. Then they walked around their neighborhood and planted crocus bulbs along the routes they take as they walk to the grocery store, to Emily's school, and to the nearby playground. Places that needed a bulb or two. At the moment, Emily thinks it is a game that her dad plays with her. But Willy thinks of it as "affirmative vandalism." Again, willing to make the changes in the environment around themselves and not waiting for God to come and make

change. Sometimes when we make the changes in ourselves and our environment, we are God's hands; putting faith, hope and action to work.

Watershed moments are hard to create in life, but sometimes they appear, and we look differently at life. There was a flight out of Chicago. The skies were blue and it looked like a great day to fly. The flight had a large amount of children on board. Ten minutes into the flight, the passengers were given their breakfast, and everything was going as predicted. However, within a short amount of time, the air began to become turbulent. The flight attendants scurried around gathering up the breakfast trays and securing the cabin. The turbulence continued, only with greater frequency and strength. The flight attendants were told to make sure the passengers' seat belts were fastened and then to take their seats.

At this point, children and adults alike were afraid and started to cry. The mood on the plane was intense. The pilot only made things worse when he announced that they cannot get above or below the choppy air. They were going to have to fly through it.

On board was an older gentleman busy blowing up balloons. No one seemed to notice that he was making cats, poodles, elephants, etc. And almost as quietly as he made his creations, he moved from seat to seat, giving out colorful balloons to the crying children. It was easy to see how much the man enjoyed giving his gift of love to the children. He calmed many children and adults alike on that flight out of Chicago.

I suppose that we all make good and not so good choices everyday of our lives. The doctor said that I needed to take care of myself and lose weight and exercise regularly or else. What the doctor didn't tell me was the difference it would make in my life.

- The doctor didn't tell me that I would have more energy after losing a few pounds.
- The doctor didn't tell me that I would feel better about myself after I exercised on a regular basis.
- And the doctor didn't tell me that my stress level would be greatly reduced and ways of coping with problems would be greatly increased.
- But that's not all. Because if I do what I am supposed to do, I can live a long and healthful life.

When Jesus offered the blessings to those gathered to hear the Sermon on the Plain, it was a choice given as a call to discipleship. But woe to those whose life is not faithful to God. May we all live to receive congratulations knowing that it is not something we earn but only a by-product of how we live our life today. Amen.