

Prologue: Caley was fighting an illness this week that was officially diagnosed as NOT Covid on multiple occasions. While he is finally feeling better, it took his voice on the way out.

Happy Are the Blessed

This morning I want to hold up two texts that we maybe don't tie together very often: Psalm 1 and Jesus' Sermon on the Plain from Luke 6. One starts "Happy are those" and the other starts "Blessed are you."

You could say that both texts are wisdom statements. There is a whole section of the Bible that is categorized as wisdom literature, but we don't usually put Luke or the Psalms in those categories.

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job are the books we usually think of as wisdom literature, each with their own flair and personality.

Proverbs you could think of a brilliant young teacher, Ecclesiastes as a sharp middle-aged critic, and Job as a weathered old soul who has seen a lot in their day.

They all have different approaches, but they are all addressing the same questions. Questions that are as relevant to us as they were to the age they were written in:

How should I live in the world?

What is the good life?

If I tried to live wisely, what should I expect?

What will God do for me if I really try and do the right thing?

Our modern sensibilities really draw us to the gritty confrontational styles of Job and Ecclesiastes. Pressing for better answers.

Proverbs on the other hand, is...a little underwhelming
Sometimes we treat that kind of wisdom like a fortune cookie.
We're excited to see what's inside, but the wisdom is simple, predictable and
quickly forgotten.

Tim Mackie helpfully identifies that for the most part, Proverbs focuses on
the general rule and Ecclesiastes and Job focus on the exceptions to the rule.
Proverbs says "generally when people do this, this is what happens" and Job
and Ecclesiastes say "yes but what about when that's not how it works..."
All three books are in conversation with each other and provide important
perspectives.

Psalm 1 sets the tone for the Old Testament's glorious songbook, and it does
so with conventional wisdom, akin to what we might find in Proverbs:

Happy is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.
Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

I think we sometimes struggle with this kind of wisdom today for several reasons.

First of all, like Job and Ecclesiastes, we want a satisfying answer as to why *faithful* trees sometimes wither while the wicked chaff still floats in the air.

And second, we tend to see the world today less in terms of “binaries” and more in terms of “spectrums.”

Thinking in terms of binaries is like a standard light switch.

The light is either on. Or off.

Good. Or wicked.

Sinner. Or Saint

Faithful. Or Unfaithful.

And these categories just feel awfully simple and a little judgemental to us.

Spectrums seem to accommodate more of the complexity of life.

It's like having a light switch on a dimmer switch.

There are more than just two ways of seeing things.

We've all sinned, mocked, been unfaithful at one time or another, and there are lesser and greater degrees of those things, so why can't we just all agree that life is hard and complicated and we're all doing the best we can?

While Proverbs (and Psalm 1) might not offer *all* the answers to our questions, let us not assume that these texts were simply wisdom to people of another time and another place.

Because good and evil is very much real, and general truths are not useless just because they are not recipes for success 100% of the time.

Psalm 1 may appeal to us in tying happiness to groundedness.
To delight and meditate on the ways of God is to find oneself in the end,
stable, anchored and bearing fruit.
Strong trees with good root systems. Fruit. We understand these things.

The contrast is chaff.

Growing up, we filled silo while the dew was still on the alfalfa.
We'd start sometimes at 4 AM in the dark, with the goal to be done by
mid-morning.

The chopper picks the alfalfa off the ground and blows it into the wagon, but
my dad taught me that if the sun dries it out, the chaff is blown about by the
wind, turning to powder and it loses nutritional value for the cattle.

Rebecca Blair Young writes that “life does offer opposing choices: to indulge
in what the world has to offer for pleasure, or to dig deep and quench one’s
thirst for happiness by connecting with the Maker.”

Pleasure is not the problem of course, pleasure is created by God and is one
of the great gifts of life. Pleasure as a way to bypass connection with God
and with neighbor is where things get chaffy.

Charles Mendenhall identifies this chaffy life as a life of “anxious
self-protection and sufficiency. Life is self-ruled, self-grounded, self-centered.
It is free-floating and unattached. It concocts and owns the truth and the
truth is it's own.”

It has the stamp of the American Dream all over it.

A few months ago I watched a documentary on Paris Hilton called “This is
Paris.”

I'm sure we've all seen it and that I am part of a long line of First Mennonite
pastors to reference her from the pulpit.

For those of you who don't know, Paris Hilton is a celebrity, model, business
women, considered to be one of the first "influencers."

She is worth over \$300 million and her line of handbags and perfumes gross
over 2 billion annually. She has over 17 million followers on instagram, and
the documentary shows a life of private jets, clubs, revolving-boyfriends and
walk-in closets like you've never seen.

Paris Hilton is the gold standard of what millions and millions of Americans
reach for when they wake up in the morning. The pinnacle of success and
happiness.

But there is a scene in the documentary where Paris is telling her sister that
she can't sleep because her mind won't stop moving. Her sister says:

"I've been telling you for 15 years that you need to go on a vacation with no
phone and just chill"

"Yeah right" she responds. I haven't been on a vacation in...I just love
making money."

"I definitely want to have a family, I just don't know when I'll have time. I
will not stop until I make a billion dollars. And then I think I can relax. I just
don't want to ever have to worry about anything."

"And you're happy?" her sister asks.

After a pause Paris responds.

"Sometimes."

So many are wrapped up in a cultural pursuit of happiness that is blown
about with the wind. An impoverished happiness without roots.
Constantly restless and on the move, never satisfied, always on to the next
thing, the new contact, or the greater high."

In contrast, biblical happiness is a deep, continuous steeping of oneself in God's word, trusting in God's leading, seeking God's counsel, and learning to live, survive, and prosper by turning again and again to the source of life."

Mendenhall writes:

"The righteous are characterized by a steady, grounded persistence and focus. This enables them to bear fruit even in the confusion of life--to walk, sit, and stand in good company with hope in a world of despair, embracing the mystery of life where others only see messiness."

And this is where I see connection with Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Plain.

If you heard the text read this morning and found it to be familiar but also a little bit different, it is because this is a less polished telling of what we call the Beatitudes that start off Matthew's Sermon on the Mount.

Where Matthew has Jesus on a mount, to invoke comparison with Moses on Mount Sinai, Luke has him on a level place, talking to his disciples, but in the presence of a crowd.

And like Psalm 1, Luke's account speaks to both the grounded *and* the chaff.
(Matthew leaves out the woes entirely)

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you

and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.
“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.
For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.
“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.
Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

It reads like wisdom statements we might find in Proverbs, but almost turned upside down and inside out, where the blessings and the woes got switched around.

No wonder we have historically domesticated this text to make it more palatable.

David Ostendorf writes:

“God does not bless us as we maintain the status quo, reaping the accolades of those who hear us and follow us.

God does not bless us as we bathe in respectability in the eyes of the world.

God does not bless us as we quietly maintain tradition and gloss over or ignore prophetic voices calling us back to

God in the church and in the world.

God does not bless us as we protect and build institutions and empires.

God does not bless us, well off, full, comfortable, hearty and well spoken of.

The realm of God rests among those who have nothing but God.”

Grounded in the will of God, relinquishing the self for the sake of the other.

Like a tree, planted by streams of water.

May we open ourselves up this wisdom.

Because it is not “blessed are those who seek to be happy,
but happy are those who seek to be a blessing”