Almost 18 years ago this week, my family was forced out of our home due to a small fire that started in our basement and engulfed into the kitchen area on the 1st floor. Even though much was the 1st floor and 2nd floor was not harmed, there were a lot of smoke damage. Thankfully no one was injured out of the incident. Over the next 3 months, we were temporarily displaced into a tiny one bedroom rental apartment with all 5 of us while dealing with the insurance adjustors and the contractors…etc.. As bad as it might sound, in retrospect, we counted our blessings giving thanks to God that everyone was safe and that’s the most important thing. Our temporary woes and distresses did work out at the end with an almost completely renovated house. Our misfortune turned out to be a blessing in disguise after all.

In the gospel lesson that we just read, Jesus was also teaching his followers an important lesson in life concerning our blessings and our woes each day. Jesus was giving the crowd the famous *Beatitudes* as part of the Sermon on the Plain. The very same event was recorded in two of the four gospels in Matthew and in Luke. However, if you compare these two narratives of the same event side-by-side, you would notice some subtle differences. The Luke version is not as detailed as Matthew did, as many scholars believed that Luke used Matthew as his primary source. Matthew was written primarily for the Jewish audience or readers, whereas Luke was targeting the mostly poorer Gentile audience or readers. Most readers would also notice that Luke presented both the “blessings” AND the “woes”, whereas Matthew only presented the “blessings” but not the “woes”.

Regardless of whichever version you may be referring to, both versions of the *Beatitudes* did offer us a sense of what the new Kingdom of God may look like but from different perspective. The Luke version emphasized the dramatic reversal of what the new kingdom of God would look like and the consequences if one fails to adhere to those warnings or take them seriously. Luke presented a more hopeful message not only about the way things are now, but also about how the people ought to live.[[1]](#footnote-1) Matthew’s version on the other hand, offered the perspective of those who believe they were already part of the Kingdom of God – primarily the Jewish audience. THAT is the biggest difference between the Matthew and the Luke version of the same event.

Jesus was addressing to an audience of grassroot common folks – the poor, the sick, the widow, the farmers and fishermen…etc., not some elite aristocrats, political or religious leaders. Having spent some time up in the mountain with his disciples to pray and retreating themselves from the crowd to refocus on their ministry. Instead of constantly doing, they took time to pray and to discern what God might be calling them next. Jesus and his disciples came down from the mountain but a multitude was already waiting for them.

Luke described that Jesus was speaking on a “level place” amongst the crowd, perhaps this was to be taken metaphorically that Jesus did not speak in any lofty spiritual terms, but instead in the language which the people understood and took it to the heart and put them into practice. As we’ve seen throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus did not only talk the talk but he walked the talk as well among the people.

Through this *Beatitudes,* Jesus outlined to the crowd (and to us all today) a vision that might seem difficult to grasp at first because it requires a lot of work and a great deal of personal sacrifices in order to see the kingdom of God. But instead, **the people wanted instant gratification and immediate success, without laying down the solid foundation of their faith. They wanted the results without putting in the hardworks that were necessary.** This was NOT an easy sell for Jesus to the people, because of the people’s stubborn hearts.

At times, Jesus used harsh language that the people did not particularly want to hear. Many rejected him just as their ancestors did to their prophets when they did not do as the LORD required of them.[[2]](#footnote-2) The people showed the prophets the door and chased them out of town instead, as we read previously in Isaiah and Jeremiah. Nevertheless, these words of warnings and challenges were necessary in waking the people up, as they gaze upon the horizon of God’s new kingdom.

The people want to know how they may see God’s kingdom but they were reluctant to make the personal sacrifices as required of them. They refused to let down their nets and cast them on the other side of the boat, having caught nothing all day long. But these acts of obedience and discipline were intentional in paving the way for Kingdom of God to come, even when things might appear gloomy or uncertain. **As we’ve seen throughout history, God at times does call upon the people to take drastic measures in transforming and renewing of our lives, in anticipation of God’s new reality to come. But unfortunately many have refused to embrace the moment! They have dwelled upon their woes instead of the blessings to come.**

As Jesus 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. 2* ***Rejoice in that day and leap for joy****, for surely your reward is great in heaven.[[3]](#footnote-3)* Jesus outlined for them what they must do, but ultimately the people need to take full ownership of what is being entrusted to them through their actions and their prayers.

Furthermore, in Luke’s recording of this event, Jesus did not only list the blessings but he also described to them about the woes. What the consequences are if the people fail to honor what is required of them. This was a reality check (a wake-up call!) for us as well, as we re-examine our lives and make any necessary adjustments and corrections in working toward God’s kingdom that is to come. *“Woe to you who are rich [now], 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 [now], for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Jesus offered a stern warning upon those who are rich, content and satisfied now that they might face the imminent fallouts to come. They must be willing to adhere the Spirit’s leading and to make dramatic and necessary adjustments in terms of how they live and practice their faith. This is all part of the associated cost of discipleship and obedience, in following Jesus.

The Kingdom of God does not belong to anyone who are haughty and proud, and think they’ve got it all worked out, but instead it belongs to those who are the least amongst them. *Blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who are weeping now, for theirs is the kingdom of God. They are the ones who will inherit the earth. They are the ones who be filled and see God.*

Undoubtedly, Jesus left many of his followers dumbfounded, scratching their heads with this message. What are we supposed to do now, teacher? Things that are considered common sense or as desirable are all of a sudden undesirable. The hungry, the poor, those who are hurt, those who mourn, are to be celebrated.[[5]](#footnote-5) Those who are rich, full and laughing now, will be disappointed, hungry, mourn and weep. Welcome to the new reality of God’s kingdom!

As Jesus taught that one’s salvation is no longer based upon our lineage and affiliation but instead upon the kingdom of God as revealed to us through our faith and discipline. We shall trace the footsteps of Christ’s compassion towards others and fulfill Christ’s mandate of the Great Commission. Even our unsuccessful attempts and disappointments would pave the ways, as stepping stones, towards God’s sovereign purposes of lifelong growth, learning and nurture. Our woes will be part of God’s blessings. **The trials and challenges that we face in life day-to-day are part of our call of discipleship and testament of our faith.**

As a number of us who are currently studying the Book of Job in our afternoon Bible Study, we’ve seen how Job’s life was almost completely wiped out through series of calamities that God had permitted Satan to place upon him. God had complete confidence and trust in his faithful servant Job. Job was one of the richest men known at that time but he lost almost all of his earthly possessions, his personal pride and achievements, his family and other relationships…all of his “blessings” were literally taken away from him in a flash instinct. Despite all the woes that had fallen upon him, Job still thanked God for what God had blessed him with. He had kept his faith in his all mighty and all sovereign God. Job exemplified his life of integrity and faithfulness as he confessed to his friends and his wife that “*the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."[[6]](#footnote-6)*

As God’s called disciples, we are being challenged to dream dreams and to exercise our *“****energy, intelligence, imagination and love****”* as some of us have vowed with our ordinations, that would enable us to see the Kingdom of God that is already here and is yet to come. **May be continue to seek God and be opened to God’s calling amongst us through new opportunities to witness and to embody God’s love, not only in our lives, but in the lives of others.**

In closing, I would like to share with you a poem that captures the spirit of our theme this morning as we count our blessings in the midst of our woes…it goes like this….

***Count your blessings instead of your crosses;***

***Count your gains instead of your losses;***

***Count your joys instead of your woes;***

***Count your friends instead of your foes.***

***Count your smiles instead of your tears;***

***Count your courage instead of your fears.***

***Count your full years instead of your lean;***

***Count your kind deeds instead of your mean.***

***Count your health instead of your wealth;***

***Love your neighbor as much as yourself.”***

***-Author unknown***

1. *Avram, Wes, Connections, Year C, Volume 1, P.250* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Luke 6:23* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Luke 6:20-23* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Luke 6:24-26* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Darden, Robert F. *Connections Year C Volume 1, p. 252* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Job 1:21* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)