

Dancing on the Ceiling

Luke 6:17- 24

February 11, 2007

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There's a great musical that was produced in 1951, called Royal Wedding and starring June Allyson and Fred Astaire. Maybe you've seen it, or at least seen excerpts from it. One dance scene in that movie is especially memorable. Fred Astaire is in true Fred Astaire form. He's wearing tails and tap dancing across a high gloss floor. Then, it's really a natural progression when you watch the film—he runs out of dance floor space, so he tentatively does a dance step or two on a wall. Before you know it, he is securely tap dancing on the wall. Fred dances to the edge of the wall and once again, tentatively at first, he does a dance step or two, this time on the ceiling. Then in a sudden one, two three bounce step he's in full swing upside down and doing pirouettes around the chandelier.

The special effects for that scene are impressive especially when you remember that the film was made in 1951. The dancing- on- the- ceiling segment was shot inside a barrel dressed up to look like a room. The barrel turns as Fred Astaire dances, so even though he dances right side up, it looks like he is dancing upside down; his shoes click, click, clicking, on the ceiling and his bouncing head pointing at the floor.

That's what it must be like to live in God's kingdom. It's like dancing on the ceiling. Don't you imagine the disciples must have experienced a kind of spiritual vertigo as Jesus listed who will be blessed and who will be cursed when God finally has God's way in the world? Jesus says that when that time comes, those on the bottom of the social and financial success ladder, will suddenly find themselves on the top rung, and those sitting in the back of the bus, the stadium, the theater, or of life in general, will suddenly find themselves sitting in front row seats! That's the plus side of what the kingdom will be like. The down side is that in God's kingdom those people who own yachts and diamonds and take trips around the world, will find themselves groveling for their basic needs. Those who at this moment are feasting on lobster and caviar, will go to bed without any dinner at all, and those who now party hearty and laugh themselves silly, will one day have plenty to cry about. Yes, when the kingdom comes besides having to get used to stepping over ceiling lights; and getting down instead of up in the morning, we'll have to get used to a whole new order. When that new order arrives most of us here in Cove church, who are now among the haves and not the have nots, will most certainly NOT be dancing!

These are hard words to swallow. If we just had the beatitudes (which is the name given to “the blessed are you’s.”); if we just had the beatitudes to contend with then we wouldn’t feel so uncomfortable. That’s the way the beatitudes are presented to us in Matthew by the way—without the corresponding woes, and if I were to ask you, you would probably tell me that is the text you prefer. It’s certainly the text I prefer! Unfortunately, though, we are dealing with Luke. Luke tacks onto the end of the Beatitudes, a complimentary series of woes or better, the woetitudes, and right away we know that we are guilty as charged. In fact, I think we might rightly call the beatitudes and woetitudes taken together as a unit, the *guiltitudes*.

We may not own a yacht or wear diamond jewelry, eat lobster and caviar and party hearty every night, but we do have decent homes in which to live, food on our tables and left overs besides, and most of the time, we are a happy lot. At least, I saw happy people walking through Cove’s doors for worship this morning. If we are honest we have to admit that most of the time we are at the top of the heap in THIS world, which means, according to Jesus, that we will be fighting for air when the kingdom comes and our world turns upside down. Woe is us!

I think we have a right to take issue with the text. After all, is it a sin to be financially independent, to have enough wherewithal to know where your next meal is coming from. Is it a sin to be happy? Isn’t that what each of us is striving to accomplish in this world? Isn’t that our hope for our children? Still, I am struck by something I read not too long ago, from a book entitled, appropriately enough, “The Blessing.” The writer, Gregory Orr, makes the startling observation that the French word *blessier*, means to wound. It comes from the Old English, *blestian*, which meant “to sprinkle with blood.” We can imagine that *blestian* hails back to a time when animals were sacrificed and their blood used in some sort of ritual blessing ceremony. The point that Orr makes is that our blessings derive from wounds. Gregory Orr is on to something, I think. Isn’t it true that unless we experience woes, unless we have been either spiritually or physically wounded, we do not fully appreciate our blessings?

I once heard Eli Wiesel talk about what he experienced when he was finally released from Buchenwald concentration camp. The questioner asked Wiesel, “Weren’t you angry with the world and bitter, too, having experienced humanity at its most depraved?” And Wiesel replied, “On the contrary. The world I reentered after my internment, greeted me with open arms. I was loved and cared for. I couldn’t say thank you enough.” For someone like Wiesel who had experienced so much horror, everything in his new life was experienced as profound blessing.

The author James Carroll says something similar in regard to our Christian lives of faith. He says: "Jesus Christ comes as the horrible sign to us that religion without suffering is meaningless; that life without suffering love is a lie, and that an affluent Christian life is a sacrilege."

That is certainly one way to make sense of Luke's beatitudes and his complimentary woeitudes: If we do not experience some hardship in life, neither will we experience true blessing. And taking the beatitudes and woeitudes one step further, if we never experience suffering we cannot truly understand Christ's crucifixion; and we cannot fully embrace our Christian faith.

This is all well and good, except that we have forgotten the kingdom. Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven; a time when the world will be turned upside. He does not use the present tense, he uses the future tense. Those who are poor WILL one day be blessed/Those with full stomachs WILL someday go hungry, Being able to more fully enjoy blessings once we have suffered wounds is not heaven. It's a present reality. That's exactly the way the world already works.

The guiltitudes point us toward the future. I know and you probably also know however, that always with Jesus' proclamations there is a hint that the kingdom is here in this world—not fully realized certainly, but a growing reality. In this passage, Jesus is giving us a roadmap to the way the church body, aka the kingdom on earth, is supposed to operate. The poor, the hungry and mournful will receive blessings. The way the church is supposed to already operate is the way that the entire earth will one day operate, with God's help.

It is a fact that the poor, the hungry and the mournful are the reason for the church's existence. The church is one place on this planet where you are fortunate if you are unfortunate and where it is a privilege to be underprivileged. Isn't that the way it works here at Cove? I believe that we are doing a practice run of what the kingdom of God will look like when it comes in all its fullness.

This week I comprised a list of beatitudes and woeitudes as they might have been written by Luke if he had made his home among us at Cove. Mind you, I have no intention of rewriting scripture, only to make Luke's list of beatitudes and woeitudes fit more precisely our current situation here at Cove Church. With that in mind, listen now for Cove Church's beatitudes and woeitudes:

- Blessed are you who work full time and have no one to care for and teach your children.

Your children will receive child care and education through the Coveseville Child Development Center.

- Blessed are you who are hungry.

You will receive food that Cove collects and donates to the Thomas Jefferson Food Bank.

- Blessed are you who do not own your own homes.

You will become homeowners through our work with Habitat for Humanity.

- Blessed are you who have cancer and have to undergo chemo treatment.

You will receive get well cards and transportation for your children. You will receive many casseroles.

- Blessed are you who are old and living in nursing homes.

You will receive visits. You will be remembered in prayers. You will be taken out to lunch. You will continue to receive communion.

- Blessed are you who worry about sick loved ones.

You will receive phone calls and prayers and much love and you will know that you do not worry alone.

- Blessed are you when a loved one dies.

Again you will receive phone calls and prayers and you will not grieve alone.

And now for the woes:

Woe to you who own your own homes. Woe to you who are not sick, or old, or worried. Woe to you who do not need child care, or who are not hungry. Woe to you because you cannot experience these blessings. Still, blessed are you to be part of this amazing, Christ centered community.

Yes, its an upside down world right here at Cove Church. We are dancing on this vaulted ceiling, which is a challenge, and yet we are doing so well, we might advise Fred Astaire to step aside. We are jumping over our ceiling arches and doing pirouettes around our chandeliers in the upside down church of God's kingdom. May it be so the world over someday, the way it is here and now at Cove Church. Amen