

He looked up. Jesus looked up at his disciples and said . . .

Or the way The New Jerusalem Bible puts it: “. . . **fixing his eyes on his disciples**, he said . . .

Jesus, **fixing his eyes directly** on his disciples—his students, that’s you and me, as he gives a hard lesson on blessings and woes—well, it pushes my pause button.

I’m partial to Luke’s Gospel. I like the way he communicates a Jesus who is life-giving for all people—all people, the way he shows us mercy and celebrates unity. I like his big picture view which gives me a context for reflecting on the Gospel. As he explains to Theophilus in his prologue—there is always more to learn about God’s kingdom, both breadth and depth.

But when it comes to the Beatitudes that we heard this morning, I’ve always preferred Matthew’s version of eight blessings. I can identify with poor in spirit. I can identify with hunger and thirst for right relationships.

But, according to Luke, we are blessed when we are poor, when we are hungry, when we weep, when others exclude us. And woe to us who are rich, have full bellies, enjoy life, and are liked by others. What?

I remember the way my aunt used to look at me when she disapproved of something I had done: “Woe is you,” she would say. At the time, my interpretation of that: “Little missy, you will be judged and punished.”

But now, I see Luke’s woes as more like my mother’s version when she would say, “Katie bar the door,” meaning watch out, trouble is ahead, take stock of where you are standing. My mother’s version is more like a reminder of what we hear in Colossians (3:12): *clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*

My friend and mentor, The Rev. Dr. Patrick Murray, used to say to look for the promise and to look for the warning—in our dreams, in our life experiences, in Scripture. If we look closely at all the Scripture readings for today, we will see both promises and warnings. Not just according to Luke, but according to Jeremiah, the Psalmist, and Paul’s letter to the Corinthians.

So, let's take another look at Luke's blessings and woes—his version of promises and warnings. For Luke, Jesus describes faithful discipleship and to do that, he shocks our consciousness into going deeper into God's realm. Jesus is describing what it is like to live a life that is in touch with one another. His sermon is a lesson on how to hold the tension between blessings and woes and to see as God sees.

Who do we see as blessed? Who do we see as deserving respect, dignity, justice, and peace? Who do we see as deserving of God's good news? Who is in our line of sight as we navigate through our own life? Whose story are we missing?

Thirteen years ago, I went to Guatemala to visit the communities where Heifer International had a presence. It was my first real step beyond my own comfortable, self-satisfied lifestyle. A group of Heifer supporters traveled more than 500 miles by bus to remote villages over some very rough terrain. Our average speed was 20 mph—it was slow going and it was intense.

One village we visited was rated 3rd on the poverty scale with 85% as poor. Thirty-three percent of those were extremely poor. The core group of women in this village were widows who had suffered through the violence of the 36-year civil war.

As we traveled through village after village like this, tears often came to my eyes as I was struck by the struggle and the survival, by the paradox of the poverty within all the beauty. It was my first experience up close to really see how these neighbors lived, and to see with depth. I was beginning to learn what it meant to see with the eyes of an open heart.

I have a more recent experience with depth into the lives of neighbors. As many of you know, Trinity and Congregation B'nai Israel have been deeply involved in sponsoring an Afghan refugee family. Our team has helped our family with social security cards and other legal documents, medical care, housing, education, jobs, food, and friendship. This journey, too, has been intense. We've worked through language barriers, a tangle of government red tape, institutional policies that made no sense, mountains of details, and volumes of unexpected problems. But through it all, we have become an extended family. And those of us who have been blessed with the opportunity to be up close and literally on the ground with this family have had our hearts stretched.

This experience has introduced me to other neighbors that I am beginning to see more clearly. I have lots of examples of how this introduction happened, but I will share only one with you today. This one is public and upfront and in our face. In December, the Washington Post published an article with the headline: **Social Security offices have been closed for most of the pandemic. That effort to protect public health has wounded some of the neediest Americans.**

i

The article went on to say that the Social Security office had not been open for in-person business, except for a lucky few, for what was then the 605th day since it had been sealed shut to protect its employees and customers from the coronavirus.

The problem with that: some things require you to be physically present with original documents, just to start the process.

But for 605 days the doors had been closed.

The door was closed to Jennifer Hustedt hoping to drop off her son's birth certificate so he could receive his late father's disability check.

The door was closed to Emily Clark, who is deaf, and needed a statement verifying her income from disability so she could apply for food stamps and Section 8 housing.

With over 1,200 field offices normally visited by 43 million people a year--mostly shut--applying for disability or getting a Social Security card required finding a way to get online and waiting on hold on the phone for a really long, humiliating wait—in some cases, never making the connection.

I was one of those 43 million people trying to get an appointment so our Afghan family could appear in person with their original documents, to start the process of getting their social security card. In America, you can't get a driver's license, or a checking account, or a job without a SSN.

According to the Washington Post, statistics showed that Americans in need simply gave up. I did not give up. I had bonded with our Afghan family; I had love pushing me on. And even

though my heart was breaking because I was getting a firsthand knowledge of obstacles that some of our neighbors were having to push against—I know my experience was not much like their experiences. I had a cell phone with unlimited talk time, I had a computer and internet service, I was surrounded by support, I had time. . .

The thing is, for middle-class or wealthy people applying for retirement benefits online, the sudden shift in the Social Security office to remote work posed little disruption. But for those without computers or needing specialized help, the workarounds the agency put in place only made a convoluted process worse.

Again, this is only one example of obstacles that our neighbors face. And again, Luke's Gospel message of Jesus fixing his eyes directly on me, on us, giving us a lesson in really seeing one another—gives me pause.

This is a complex world with layers and layers of problems piled upon problems. Navigating this man-made white water is hard, overwhelming for some. There are no easy answers to complex problems. But I am beginning to see that Jesus' blessings and woes, his promises and warnings sermon is a lesson for our **first step**--asking us to turn, turn toward one another, hear one another's stories, experience something of one another's life—to see as God sees.

ⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/social-security-coronavirus/2021/12/18/0e3b9508-4bc1-11ec-b73b-a00d6e559a6e_story.html