

“Bad News First”
Psalm 1:1–6; Jeremiah 17:5–10; Luke 6:17–26
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“I’ve got good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?” we sometimes say. Usually the response is something like, “Well, let’s hear the bad news first and get it out of the way,” but what we really mean is, “Can’t we just skip over the bad news?” We don’t want to hear it, there is enough bad news already, let’s hear the good news!

This is how we often approach life, and it is how we often approach biblical texts like those we have read today. The psalmist says that those whose delight is in the law of God are like trees planted by streams of water, but those who take the advice of the wicked are like chaff that the wind drives away, they will not stand in the judgment. We love the first half of this and edit out the second.

Jeremiah says that those who trust in mere mortals and turn away from God are cursed to live like a shrub in the desert, but blessed are those who trust in the Lord, they shall be a like a tree planted by water. We love the imagery of trees flourishing but can do without the idea of being cursed like desert shrubs.

In Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, Jesus lists a series of blessings or beatitudes, as he does in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, but in Luke Jesus also lists a series of woes, which is why we prefer Matthew’s version. Who wants to talk about woes when we have beatitudes?

We know it’s all in scripture, the good and the bad, the blessing and the curse, the beatitude and the woe, but the bad stuff isn’t for us, for several reasons. We are the faithful! Why bother with a message for the unfaithful? It makes us feel uncomfortable. We are not fire and brimstone people! And there is too much negative in the world already, we need to hear the positive; we need encouragement, not chastisement!

Some churches are wholly defined by this approach, with no exceptions. When Robert Schuller began what became the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, he went door-to-door visiting

thousands of people, asking two questions. “What do you need from a church?” and “What do you never want to hear from a church?” So, the church addressed needs, which seems appropriate, and Schuller made sure people heard only what they wanted to hear, meaning no bad news!

A former music colleague of mine was friends with a music leader at the Crystal Cathedral years ago. He said all worship music had to be approved by Dr. Schuller, and it all had to be peppy and upbeat, even in Lent. There could be nothing dark, mournful, or demanding because people said they didn’t want to hear those things in word or song.

And to a certain extent, this is understandable. There is too much negative in everyday life. A mentor of mine always said his goal in ministry was to give people heaven. “There are enough people giving them hell,” he said, “I want to give them heaven!” And I get that! But there is bad news in the world. Pretending it doesn’t exist doesn’t make it go away. In fact, it may make it worse. And in the realm of faith, acknowledging the bad is an essential step in the process of salvation.

Frederick Buechner said that the Gospel is bad news before it is good news. “It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But,” Buechner continues, “it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy (*Telling the Truth*, p. 7).”

The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. Any attempt to avoid this reality leads to what Dietrick Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. “Cheap grace,” he said, “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 47).” Cheap grace is the result of refusing to acknowledge bad news.

I have heard it suggested that adults know they are sinners, somewhere deep down. This doesn’t need to be belabored. We just need to know what to do about our condition. But a theology professor of mine said he knew someone whose favorite hymn was, “I was sinking

deep in sin, whoopee!” As we look at the world around us right now — the obsession with wealth and entertainment, the comfort with deceit and outright lies, the exploitation of the poor and outcast, the meanness and hatred — it is difficult to see much acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

So, how do we hear the bad news we need to hear? Perhaps we begin by recognizing the dangers inherent in avoidance and denial. I have known people who were so terrified of receiving bad news from a doctor that they simply refused to see one. As a result, they risked missing a treatment that could have saved or at least extended their lives. And if nothing was wrong, they lived with unnecessary anxiety.

I have also known people who refused to share bad news with loved ones out of a desire to shield them from pain. I remember one couple I married when they were in their seventies. They had known each other as teenagers, then gone separate ways for over fifty years, only to lose their spouses to cancer, and find each other again. It was a wonderful marriage with two people finding joy out of sorrow.

In less than a year, though, he died suddenly, or at least she thought it was sudden. As it turned out, he had been fighting cancer for months but had not told her, so as not to trouble her. It only deepened her grief.

Pretending there is no bad news does not make it go away. If we have attitudes and behaviors that are dragging us down and distancing us from God, the people in our lives, and our own best selves, it is not helpful just to pretend everything is fine.

To return to our texts, if we are placing our trust in mere mortals — pundits, influencers, even religious leaders — and not God, we are performing a disservice to ourselves and our faith. If we are ignoring the clear teachings of scripture about the love of God and neighbor, and following the herd on a path of self-interest, we are risking our souls in the process.

But in addition to recognizing the dangers inherent in avoidance and denial, perhaps we might recognize the value in dealing with bad news directly, naming our demons and confronting them. Sometimes the only way to get to a better place in life is by working through our challenges, whatever is holding us back.

Each text we have read lists two sets of consequences. The point is not to say some will be blessed and some will be cursed, case closed, figure out where you fit into this model! It is to hold up two possibilities and point to the better one as still being on the table. Seeing the consequences of not placing our trust in God alongside the value of doing so can clarify our choices and push us in the right direction.

Eduard Schweitzer says that Jesus' words in Luke 6 are a call to action, a call to discipleship. Peter Eaton further develops this idea and says these blessings and woes challenge us to ask what we value and reject in relation to faithful Christian living. That is the point in facing bad news and dealing with it first — not to berate and demean us but to enable us to recognize the possibility of something better in our lives.

And yet, while all of this is true and of value on our journey of faith, it is important to note that what we are talking about applies not just to us on a personal level but to the church and our culture as well. The blessings and woes of Luke 6 are all second-person plural. That is, when Jesus says blessed are “you” when you who are poor, hungry, weeping, hated and excluded; and woe to “you” who are rich, full, laughing, and spoken well of; he means “you” as in all of you, you as individuals and as community. So, if there is bad news to face before there is good news, this message applies at more than a personal level.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus seems to be focused primarily on economic disparities, the suffering of the poor and the excesses of the rich. The truth is Luke's Jesus has a particular concern for the poor throughout his life and ministry.

It's not that this concern is missing in other canonical Gospels or in the Hebrew canon. The Torah is filled not just with commands to care for the poor but specific strategies for doing so, from the practice of gleaning, leaving some crops in the field, to the year of jubilee, a way of redistributing wealth. And prophets like Nathan, Amos, and Jeremiah directly challenge the abuses of the wealthy and powerful.

It's just that Luke's Jesus weaves this concern into everything, as if to say, if we ignore this — making sure people have enough to eat and a place to sleep — nothing else we do in the realm of piety will matter.

Taking all of this in, we could say, “Well, that was a problem in ancient times but not in ours,” but we know better. Wealth inequality is massive in this country, and it has grown exponentially over the past four decades. On our current course, it will only grow faster. We can consider statistics from different think tanks to support our biases, but there are no statistics based in reality that paint a different picture. The top 1% is doing better and better, and the rest are doing worse.

Obviously, this is exactly the kind of bad social news we prefer to avoid, very much like matters of racial diversity and the current crisis with immigration. And in the church, the way we justify our avoidance is by claiming that these are political issues, and thus, we cannot talk about them. Just as we don’t want to talk about personal sin, to use the old word, we don’t want to talk about social sin.

But we only do ourselves a tremendous disservice by avoiding these things. Just as there are dangers inherent in denying personal bad news, there are dangers inherent in refusing to face social wrongs. “Woe to you who are rich,” Jesus says, “for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.”

But there are also benefits to naming these social evils and confronting them, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us feel to do so. There is the possibility of shaping a better world, a world more like God’s vision of the beloved community, a world where everyone has enough, differences are seen as strengths, and the Church with a capital “C” is global and thus never confused with any national embodiment. But such a world will never exist unless we hear the bad news first.

In C. S. Lewis’ novel *The Great Divorce* there is a scene in which a character is challenged by an angelic figure to get rid of the one thing that is preventing him from making the journey to the mountains of heaven. It is a little red lizard on his shoulder that he has grown fond of and who insists the character cannot live without him. After a long, intense debate, the character finally gets up the courage to say okay, and when he does, the angel knocks the lizard to the ground, and it is transformed into a great stallion the character rides into the mountains of heaven. That’s what is possible when we hear the bad news first.