The Sadness and Gladness of God  
Luke 6:17-26

The author Anne Lamott recently gave a wonderful talk on “12 Truths I learned from Writing” in the TED talks series.

She began:

My seven-year-old grandson sleeps just down the hall from me, and he wakes up a lot of mornings and he says, "You know, this could be the best day ever." And other times, in the middle of the night, he calls out in a tremulous voice, "Nana, will you ever get sick and die?"

I think this pretty much says it for me and for most of the people I know, that we’re a mixed grill of happy anticipation and dread...¹

And I think that’s the way we are because that’s the way the world is, or at least, certainly that’s the way we’ve experienced life in the world—a mixture of ups and downs. Some of them are fun.

In the toney town of Henley, in the lovely Thames Valley—and home of the famous Henley Regatta—one of their top restaurants advertised a romantic special for Valentine’s Day. “On Valentine’s Day enjoy a sumptuous five-course dinner with your loved one; 10% discount for parties of three and more.” !!

Most, however, are not fun. The world is a mixture of joy and sadness, pain and pleasure. You only have to watch TV, read a newspaper, and you’re given examples of humans at their best and worst. You know what I mean.

It can be pretty depressing at times, and very upsetting. I think Luke knew that, and acknowledged that reality when he came to write his gospel.

Early in his gospel Luke gave us his version of Jesus’ ministry manifesto. Luke didn’t locate the speech on a mountain as Matthew did, offering us a Jesus like Moses giving the law; Luke located Jesus on a plain, accessible not only to people from Judaea and Jerusalem, but also from foreign places like Tyre and Sidon. Luke gives us ‘the sermon on the plain.’

One commentator called it “the raw, unvarnished, faith-rattling declaration of the realm of God.”²

² David L Ostendorf, “Theological Perspective” in Feasting on the Word. Louisville, John Knox Press, Year C vol.1, 357.
Raw? Notice how Luke widens Jesus’ concern: God’s blessings are for the poor in spirit, as Matthew recorded, but also for the poor. God’s blessing is for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, but also for those who are simply hungry. Why? Because God is concerned with our bodies as well as our souls. God’s love is for all the life he has created, for the whole of us. And many people, wanting to make religion a spiritual affair only, that’s unsettling.

But Luke rattles their faith even more by balancing the blessings with a series of eye-popping woes: Woe to the rich, the well-fed, woe to the respected popular people! A left-wing Jesus …? What are we to make of that?

We need to look at the word ‘woe’. Granted, there are times when Jesus uses the term ‘woe’ as an angry warning. Jesus calls out woe for cities that rejected him, or Pharisees who opposed him.

But there’s another way to look at this. I remember William Barclay drawing our attention to the Greek Luke uses: the word for ‘woe’ is ouai, o-u-a-i. Barclay said that it’s a word that doesn’t lend itself to shouting. It’s a word you speak softly, sadly. Barclay’s own translation offers, “tragic is the fate of those …” It’s regret. It’s the sadness of God

Jesus laments the mess people make of their life and the mess they make of the world. Now the book of Proverbs illustrates the word woe in a way I don’t expect you to know anything about, or relate to in any way. It uses drunkenness to illustrate woe.

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? … Who has wounds without cause? …Those who linger late over wine... it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things and your mind utter perverse things ... [Then it goes on with a lovely picture of someone totally at sea and dizzyingly out of control...]

‘Wounds without cause’! Self-inflicted wounds! There are few things sadder. There’s proof of the brokenness of the world, of the way sin has corrupted and spoiled God’s good creation and God’s gracious gift of life.

The current immigration issue offers illustrations. The issue is difficult, divisive and controversial, so let me bypass the complexities and the politics and make two simple points.

The first is that while too many Americans are griping and complaining about the state of the country, there are still thousands of people who want, in many cases desperately want, to live here. Let’s not forget how blessed we are; let’s not neglect the gracious gifts we enjoy each day. Gratitude should throb through the life of the nation.

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3 Proverbs 23:29.
Secondly, while politicians grapple for solutions, let’s not forget that immigrants are people. They quite literally fit Jesus’ categories of people who are poor, and hungry; people who weep. God wants to bless them. Despite what the world tells them, they are precious children of God and Jesus wants them too, to know the blessings of God’s love and care. And Jesus wants Christians to help in that regard.

The latest issue of *The Christian Century* carries an item:

> For more than a decade, members of the interfaith humanitarian group No More Deaths have been placing food, clothing, and jugs of water in the Sonoran Desert to aid migrants who have crossed into Arizona from Mexico. Their goal is simple: to prevent migrants from dying in the desert. Between 1999 and 2018, more than 3,000 migrants perished while trying to make the dangerous crossing.

> During the summer of 2017, as temperatures reached triple digits, [four women] drove into ... vast desert wilderness along the border, and left behind jugs of water and canned food for migrants. The four women, all volunteers with No More Deaths, were followed by a U.S. Border Patrol officer, arrested, and charged with entering the wildlife refuge without a permit and with “abandonment of property.” According to court records, the women said their actions were motivated by their religious convictions and their belief that everyone should have access to means of survival.

> Last month [they] were convicted. They face up to six months in prison.⁴

Now the issues are complex. You can argue they were breaking the law. They needed a permit to enter the refuge and they didn’t have one. They could be thought to be littering a wildlife preserve, and care is needed to preserve the natural habitat. And they were assisting migrants many of whom were probably illegally trying to enter the country. All that is true. However, whether you agree or disagree with their actions, at least acknowledge that they have heard the words of Jesus “…I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink ... Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these ... you have done it unto me.”⁵

Our God, our creator, the source of this unbelievable *everything*, acts out of his nature, which is love, and giving and enjoying—for all God’s children. God’s sadness is to give way to God’s gladness.

The same issue of *The Christian Century* has a lovely article in which a youth pastor writes of an episode in C S Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* in which Aslan takes a break from saving the world to play a rousing game of tag with the children ...“an exhilarating, joy-filled

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https://www.christiancentury.org/article/editors/convicted-taking-water-thirsty-people

⁵ Matthew 25:35
chase through the hills until they finally collapse “in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs.” “It was such a romp,” Lewis writes, “as no one had ever had except in Narnia.”

Debie Thomas writes,

> The first time I encountered this scene—as an adult, reading the Narnia books to my own kids—I cried. The possibility that God might laugh, romp, and play with his children stopped me in my tracks. How could such a scandalous thing be true?

It may seem scandalous, but it is true: God delights in creation. God has gifted us with the marvelous diversity of living things that is our world. In several places scripture attests to the way these gifts express the giving, loving delight God takes in creation, and God longs to share his delight, his joy, his love with all his children.

That’s our calling as believers. That’s the reason for church. I love the way the service of ordination we engage in today asks our officers elect a powerful question:

> Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?

That’s a calling not only for officers but for all followers of Jesus.

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https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/playful-romp-god