

Like Those Who Dream

Psalm 126; Matthew 6:25-33

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Kate Bowler is a name that I think at least some among us are familiar with. I know I've referred to her in past sermons and I believe others have as well.

Bowler's official title is "Associate Professor of the History of Christianity in North America." She has spent a lot of time researching the "prosperity gospel," this belief that "God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith." When it comes to faith, right inputs equal good outputs.

Bowler rose to prominence a few years ago not because of her academic work but because of her personal story. In 2015, at age 35, as a young mother, and as her career was just taking off, she was unexpectedly diagnosed with Stage IV cancer.

There was a perverse irony here, she knew. Here she was writing about people who believed that suffering was correlated to a failure of faith, that sickness was something to overcome through belief... and she had cancer.

Now, I should make it clear that Bowler never *believed* in the prosperity gospel. She's a Mennonite, at least by marriage, and Mennonites aren't allowed to believe that God wants us to be healthy and wealthy! ☺

I'm joking. Kind of.

(Also, in case Kevin, our resident genealogist, happens to listen to this sermon, Bowler is originally from Winnipeg, and I believe she married a Penner.)

At any rate, while Bowler was never personally attracted to the prosperity gospel, she was curious about it. She wanted to understand how people could believe in this straightforward connection between faith and blessing, particularly when Christians claim to follow a suffering Messiah.

But then, when she got sick, she discovered that even though she wasn't one of those crazy Christians who believe that faith leads always and only to health and wealth, she still found herself thinking that there should be at least *some* correlation between inputs and outputs.

“C’mon, God, this isn’t fair! I’ve been *pretty* good, after all. I haven’t sinned in any exciting ways. I teach divinity, for heaven’s sake! Shouldn’t I expect at least a *little* better than cancer at age 35?!”

Bowler decided to process these questions about suffering and faith and blessing and the inscrutability of God’s will publicly.

She penned an article that went viral about the irony of being an expert in health, wealth and happiness while being ill in *The New York Times*.¹ She wrote a memoir called *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I’ve Loved)*, which was also very popular. She just released another book (which I have not yet read) called *No Cure for Being Human*. She has a podcast called Everything Happens.

She’s a voice many are listening to when it comes to deep questions of faith and blessing and suffering and how to make sense of it all.

I watched an interview with Bowler this week where she was asked a question about God’s presence throughout her cancer diagnosis and treatment (which is ongoing).

She responded by saying that she wanted to find a “chronic faith” versus a “crisis faith.”

She compared it to living with cancer. In the early days, there was an intensity that came from simply lurching from test to test, treatment to treatment, crisis to crisis. When you don’t think you have long to live, everything in life is taken up into a heightened register. It was certainly not fun, but everything—in life and in faith—felt *urgent*.

When her cancer became more of a long-term proposition (she says she kind of lives six months at a time these days), her perspective shifted. It became a chronic reality rather than a crisis to get through.

The same can be true for our faith, can’t it? In a crisis, faith can seem somehow easier... or at the very least more instinctive and natural. When everything else is falling apart and God is all that you have, faith can seem as obviously necessary as the air we breathe. When we’re desperate, we cry out to God.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/death-the-prosperity-gospel-and-me.html?smid=tw-share>

When life is just ordinary, comfortable, unremarkable, boring... when there is no great trial to overcome, no major threat looming, no potentially life-altering decision to make, faith can easily just kind of recede into the background.

I think that when Bowler says she wants to find a “chronic faith” she is saying that she wants a faith that can incorporate *all* of life—the joy and the pain, the praise and the lament, the laughter and the tears, the gratitude and the confusion, the love and the fear, the exciting and the mundane.

She doesn’t want a faith that is just about inputs and outputs, where religious belief and practice is just a means to an end, a mechanism to try to secure the right personal outcomes.

She wants a faith that is able to sustain her throughout all of life, whatever it holds.

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday. It’s a day when we’re supposed to focus on gratitude, not things like cancer and struggle and big, inconvenient questions.

And yet, this week I found myself thinking often about Bowler’s distinction between “chronic faith” and crisis faith.” I wondered if the same distinction might be made for gratitude.

What if, for example, we were to swap out the word “crisis” for “blessing.” Could we say that as Christians we are seeking to live lives of “chronic gratitude” rather than gratitude that only flares up from time to time when obvious blessings come our way?

It is natural to give thanks for God’s good gifts. Gratitude pours out of us in the happier moments of life. The birth of a child, a wedding, a new job, a life-giving friendship, success at a project we’ve been labouring on, experiences in the wonder of creation, a bountiful harvest, the discovery of new places, restored health after an injury or a time of illness.

Thanksgiving flows out of us at these times in life. And this is good. It is appropriate to give thanks because we intuitively recognize that these good things actually *are* gifts. And all gifts imply a giver. It is good and right to give thanks to God. It is a duty of faith.

And yet, as you may have noticed, life is not simply one long series of uninterrupted moments that obviously and easily call forth gratitude.

So, what do we do when we must walk through the opposites of all the positive examples I just mentioned? What about when there is no pregnancy? What about when the harvest is lousy? What about when you're mired in a job you don't like, or the marriage is teetering on the brink? What about when you get cancer at age 35?

Do we just press pause on gratitude until our circumstances improve?

Well, I suspect I am not alone in saying that this is very often what I *in fact* do.

My instinct is *not* to give thanks for hard things in my life and all the good and important things they might be teaching me, the character refinements that they might be making possible in my life.

My instinct is to pray that the hard things go away, the quicker the better.

I don't think this instinct is bad. During his earthly ministry, people flocked to Jesus with their need. *Jesus, I am blind... my daughter is sick... I am a leper... my brother has died... our friend is lame... Jesus there are bad things going on in my life and I need you to make them go away. The quicker the better.*

And Jesus healed them. Jesus did not say, "Now, I realize things are going poorly for you, but you need to gain a bit more of an enlightened perspective... you need to practice gratitude to improve your mental health... you need to understand how your pain is making you stronger."

He didn't say any of these things. He looked on them with compassion. He loved them. He healed them.

This human longing for goodness and blessing and bounty and health and wholeness is reflected in the Psalm we heard earlier.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord! We want our mouths to be filled with laughter again. We want to rejoice. We want more good things and less bad things!

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. We want to see that all the hard things that we endured or are presently enduring have a purpose, that they can be redeemed. We all long to discern patterns in our suffering, to figure out what God is doing in us and in our world. We want the world and our lives to make moral sense, even when so much suffering seems senseless. We want to see how ultimately the bad things must give way to the good things.

It is normal to long for these things because these are things for which we were made. We need never apologize for pounding on heaven's door for good gifts or for giving thanks when they come.

But I also find myself longing for a disposition of gratitude that is more chronic than merely a response to the quality of my circumstances.

I want to be a grateful *person*, not just someone who is grateful when my circumstances align with my preferences. I want gratitude to be a feature of my *character*. I want to be the kind of person who embodies Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 5:

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thess. 5:16-17).

I want to be the kind of person who could conceivably even give thanks during trials because I know that suffering can be one of the ways in which God refines his children, and because I know that Jesus suffered, and because most fundamentally the Christian story is one in which light and life emerge out of darkness and death.

One of the most poetic passages in scripture that reflects this "chronic gratitude" is Habakkuk 3:17-18:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

Yet I will rejoice. This, I think, is the mantra of the chronically grateful.

Well, if Psalm 126 gives us language for our longing for blessing and restoration then I think Matthew 6 teaches us to expand our vision of what this might involve and how it might arrive.

Seek first God's kingdom, Jesus says. Which, as we know, is a kingdom in which the word "blessing" is turned upside down.

Jesus calls “blessed” those whose experience of the world we would never associate with blessing.

The poor, the meek, the persecuted, those who mourn, the merciful, those who hunger for righteousness and purity, the peacemakers. Those who are insulted and spoken poorly of.

These are not the healthy and wealthy. These are not the shiny, happy avatars of blessing that grace the covers of books in the religious self-help section.

Yet these are the ones to whom Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

And then, after turning upside down, or at the very least expanding our conceptions of blessing, Jesus says, “Don’t worry.”

It is worth pausing over what Jesus does *not* say, over the reasons he does not give for not worrying.

Jesus doesn’t say, “Do not worry because if you believe in me everything will turn out alright for you.” Or “do not worry because a life of discipleship will instantly usher in such tranquility and transcendence and health and wealth that you will no longer be touched by the troubles of the world.”

Jesus does not say, “Do not worry because the world isn’t really a scary place and you’re just making too much of it.”

What Jesus in fact says is, “Do not worry because worrying doesn’t add a single hour to your lives...

And because life consists of more than the status of your present circumstances...

And because your Father knows what you need (and he knows it better than you do!).

Jesus doesn’t say, “Don’t worry because there aren’t things in the world worth worrying about” but because your confidence is to be anchored in the character and promise of God himself.

Ultimately, worry represents an attempt to control. It’s a futile attempt, but it is an attempt.

But life has this persistent way of reminding us that we are not in control, doesn’t it?

And so, in this world that we cannot control, in this world where the rain falls on the just and the unjust, in this world where the blessings we long for are not always the blessings we get, in this

world where each day has enough trouble of its own, in this world where Jesus is always nudging us to conform our lives to the pattern of his...

Don't worry. Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and you will find that you get more than you ever imagined.

You will be blessed in the deepest, truest, and most lasting way.

The title of my sermon this morning comes from the first verse of Psalm 126:

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

To be a Christian is to be a dreamer. It is to dream of a world where all have enough, where all are at peace, where joy has swallowed up sorrow, where death and decay no longer hover over our days. Where all creation is characterized by the deep harmony and wholeness for which God created it.

It is to dream of fortunes being restored, personally, socially, spiritually, cosmically.

It's a ridiculous dream, at least based on the evidence of our world. We see glimpses of this here and there, but only ever here and there.

Yet this remains God's dream for the world he has made. This remains the future toward which God is guiding all creation.

And this is the dream that guides all our being and doing and struggling and suffering and hoping and persevering in between now and its fulfillment.

We know that even struggle and sorrow can be occasions of blessing and gratitude not because they aren't hard, not because Christians have this weird need to pretend things are other than they are, not because gratitude is the right answer on some kind of divine test, **but because God has entered into these hard things himself, as the means through which all things are made new.**

This is the dream that nourishes and strengthens our gratitude, on this Thanksgiving and beyond.

So may we seek *first* God's kingdom. May we trust God's upside-down pattern of bringing healing and hope into our lives and our world.

And may we be people of chronic gratitude. May we seek to give thanks in all circumstances.

Not just for the many obviously good gifts that God gives, but for God's presence and peace through those things which don't feel like gifts at all.

Amen.

