

Some people have life stories that are tragic. Some are comic. And some people seem to have both. Last year, I came across one of those life stories that's both tragic *and* comic. It's inspiring and it also leaves me scratching my head.

It's the story of a young scholar named Kate Bowler. She teaches at Duke, and she had the distinction in her early 30's of writing the first large-scale history of something called the **Prosperity Gospel**. The PG is a mash-up of certain bits of Christianity that allows people to believe in God as a really big sugar daddy; a kind of cosmic boyfriend who comes with the ultimate benefits of health, wealth, and happiness.

Some describe the PG as a perfect American religion, because we're consumers and the God of the PG exists to give me what I want – as long as I have the right kind of faith. You see, in the PG having the right faith is how I earn it. That's the catch in the PG. Believers only receive God's blessing by having the right kind of faith. It's a transactional religion. So even though it sounds amazing, it can evoke all kinds of guilt if people believe in a God who exists to give them health, wealth, & happiness, but they never receive it. It means they don't have the right faith.

Bowler's book about the PG chronicles her experience of megachurch pastors with "mega-watt smiles". She also has this great bit where she compliments megachurch pastors on their hair, with phrases like, "you definitely have the right

hair for this gospel!” (She says they love it when she does that). As a young scholar, she spent 10 years, from her early 20’s to her early 30’s, observing & participating in religious communities who believe in a *name it & claim it* theology. You *name* what you want – health, wealth, or happiness. And then you *claim* that God will give it. She writes about an emaciated man who was rolled around a megachurch in his wheelchair as people proclaimed that was already healed. He wasn’t. She writes about a woman who danced around her sister’s deathbed – to the horror of family – proclaiming that her sister could live.¹ She didn’t. But that’s how *name it & claim it* works. It refuses to accept loss, failure, or death.

If there’s one word to summarize the message of the Prosperity Gospel it’s the word “**blessed.**” That’s the title of Kate Bowler’s book, *Blessed*. She says the great triumph of the PG, is its “popularization” of that term.² According to her, *blessed* has become, “the humble brag of [our generation]. #Blessed is the only caption suitable for viral images of alpine vacations and family yachting in barely there bikinis. It says: ‘I totally get it. I am down-to-earth enough to know that this is crazy.’ But it also says: ‘God gave this to me. [Adorable shrug.] Don’t blame me, I’m [just] blessed’.”³

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

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Today's readings invite us to consider how the PG's understanding of "blessed" matches what we hear on the lips of Jesus. Today Jesus is teaching followers what it means to be blessed at the beginning of his most famous sermon. In Luke, we call it The Sermon on the Plain – bc he "stood on a level place" before he begins. The more famous version in Matthew is known as The Sermon on the Mount – bc Matthew tells us he went up a mountain (like Moses) before preaching. Some of the details are different but the message in both versions is the same. Jesus is describing what it means to be blessed as God's children.

This is how he begins. *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.* Those are the first blessings on Jesus' lips. And if we're paying attention they should strike a chord with the PG because Jesus is talking about health, wealth, and happiness. He's talking about a kingdom, food, and laughing. We could even say, Jesus affirms blessing as health, wealth, and happiness. But as we keep listening, we realize Jesus means something very different than PG.

For Jesus, health, wealth & happiness have nothing to do with strength, money, or popularity. Just look at what he does *before* he starts preaching. The order of events is important here. Before he starts preaching, Jesus heals people! Luke says the crowd arrived to hear him AND TO BE HEALED. Everyone's

trying to touch him. Luke says power is practically radiating off him (Lk. 6:19).

And after he heals people, Jesus does not begin his sermon by saying, "Blessed are those I just healed, bc they have the right kind of faith." Instead, he says, "Blessed are you who are (still) suffering."

For Jesus, health, wealth & happiness are not about material prosperity. They're about the relationship we place at the center of our life. That's what blessing means. For Jesus, blessing is about our love of God and our dependence on God at the center of life. It becomes really clear in the next verse when he says, *Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and slander you on my account. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven* (Luk 6:20-23). If that's not the opposite of the PG, I don't know what is.

They're shocking words, and it takes some effort to unpack them. But even on the surface, we can see he's redefining our ideas of health, wealth, & happiness. He's redefining our idea of blessing. **Instead of how much we have for ourselves, blessing is about how much we depend on God.** The poor (by definition) don't have enough to survive. Jesus says they're blessed, not bc they're poor, but bc they have to depend on God. The hungry don't have enough to be nourished, so they're blessed, not bc they're malnourished but bc they must depend on God. Grieving people are lost in sorrow. They're blessed, not bc they're suffering but bc they

have to depend on God. That's the only comparison he's making. Jesus is a risky preacher bc he uses a shocking image to make a very specific point.

He's *not* inviting us to become destitute, malnourished, or self-loathing. **He's inviting us to depend on God with the same tenacity as people who have no choice.** Bc many of us do have a choice about how much we depend on God. And if we choose not to depend on God, Jesus says we should be pitied more than the poor, hungry, and grieving. That's how his teaching works. We're invited to become like them simply in our dependence on God; to embrace God as if we had nothing. That's true blessing. That's when we become like a tree planted by streams of water, yielding fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither (Psa. 1).

To be cursed means depending on ourselves. "Woe to you who are rich, full, and laughing," because you're under the illusion that you are in control. The illusion of our control is a great obstacle in Christian life. It's the illusion we hear about on the first pages of Scripture in the story of Adam & Eve; a story about some archetypal humans deluded into thinking they can be masters of their destiny. It's also the illusion underlying the PG. Bowler writes, "The prosperity gospel holds to [an] illusion of control until the very end. There is no graceful death, no *ars moriendi*, in the prosperity gospel. There are only jarring disappointments after fevered attempts to deny its inevitability."⁴

⁴ Ibid.

The tragedy of the PG is the illusion that we control our lives. It's the tragedy of the Garden of Eden all over again. **Jeremiah** also highlights this tragic illusion in our first reading when he says, "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals & make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert.... [But, he says] Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream," (Jer. 17:5-10).

If life is about trusting our strength, then eventually we will wither & die. We all do. But if life is about trusting God at the center of our being, then we flourish, and we're blessed, even in the face of death.

This is where **Paul** comes in. Paul's great masterpiece at the end of this letter to the Corinthians is about the fruit or the result of living with God at the center of our lives. Ultimately, for Paul, the fruit or result of God's blessing isn't material health, wealth, or prosperity. Paul would have been a terrible megachurch pastor. He probably didn't even have great hair. One of the few things we know about Paul is that he looked physically weak.

For Paul, **the fruit or result of God's blessing is the gift of new life – resurrection – on the other side of any death.** That's what blessing produces: life on the other side of death. He even says, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ," in other words, if we're only following Jesus for health, wealth &

happiness *now*, “we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died,” (1Cor. 15:19-20).

That’s the key. We are a people who live with the first fruits of God’s blessing; the first fruits of God’s new life on the other side of death. We’re blessed when the love of God in Christ becomes our greatest hope and our greatest strength.

At the beginning of my sermon I described the comic side of Kate Bowler’s life story. She spent a decade in the prime of her life exploring the antics of megachurches. She said, no kidding, she even saw one megachurch pastor nearly choke to death on his own smoke machine. It’s comic. But I haven’t told you the tragic side of her life story.

Shortly after publishing her book, at the age of 35, America’s historian of the PG, was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. The irony *and* tragedy were palpable. She thought, *Oh, God, this is ironic.*⁵ To be a living expert on the phenomenon of *name it & claim it* theology, and then to be struck with a devastating disease that will kill her. It’s surreal.

It’s also deepened her understanding of the word *blessed*. She writes, “Cancer requires that I stumble around in the debris of dreams I thought I was entitled to and plans I didn’t realize I had made. But cancer has also ushered in

⁵ Ibid.

new ways of being alive. I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.”⁶

Now in her late 30's and still living with cancer as a wife & mother, still living with a disease that will eventually kill her too young, she writes, "there is nothing a blessing is better suited for than an ending, nothing that cries out more for a blessing than when a world is falling apart." She suggests that a, "blessing will not fix you, will not mend you, will not give you false comfort; [blessing] will not talk to you about one door opening when another one closes. It will simply sit itself beside you among the shards and gently turn your face toward the direction from which [new] light will come, gathering itself about you as the world begins again."⁷ *Amen.*

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://katebowler.com/blessing-world-ending/>