

Sermon: Cross-Shaped Life

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Feb 23, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A particular term that is used quite frequently in ballet is ‘en croix’, or in the shape of a cross. It is a basic exercise, a mindset and a philosophy to live by. As a barre exercise, it is done with a foot tracing the shape of a cross on the floor: once to the front position, then to the side, then to the back, and again to the side. The dancer stands in the centre of the cross, while maintaining upright with arms extended, in the shape of a cross. As a mindset, ‘en croix’ seeks to create both tension and balance in the body, as both hands and feet of the dancer move to explore the space where the familiar path of the cross leads. It is both simple and elegant, yet taking years to master. In today’s Gospel reading of Luke 6:17-26, or the Sermon on the Plain as some biblical scholars call it, Jesus invites us into the tension and balance of living ‘en croix’—living a cross-shaped life.

In the preceding section, Jesus had “called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles” (v.13) Disciples are those who follow, apostles are those who lead; disciples are learners, whereas apostles are expected to teach. The Twelve are disciples learning their role to eventually grow to become apostles. So they gathered on the plain waiting to receive instruction for their new role, just as the crowds gathered, waiting to hear the words of Jesus, and to see his power manifests back into their lives. And Jesus sees in them all, a people in need of both blessings and challenges.

Unlike the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s account, where Jesus pronounced the Beatitudes of eight blessings, here in Luke, Jesus gives a balanced mix of four blessings and four woes.

*“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.*

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

*“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

*“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*

*“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

I used to read them like taking a personality quiz: that I am this and this, but not that and that; this one suits me fine but not that one. I am neither poor nor hungry, but do weep (from time to time), and have been hated (yes, I say hated) on the account of Jesus. So I guess I am somewhat blessed?

How about woes? I guess I am rich and full, comparatively to the rest of humanity, most Canadians do live in a state of affluence that many could only dream about. But what’s wrong with a bit of laughter? What’s wrong with wanting other to speak well of me?

The temptation is to read them, like we read Psalm 1, of the two paths: the path of the righteous and the path of the wicked. The righteous are like trees planted by the water—they yield fruit in all seasons, their leaves never wither, and they flourish in all they do. The wicked are not so. In the congregation of saints, the wicked cannot stand; In face of judgement, they will not be able to withstand. The wicked are like chaff, one puff, they are gone with the wind. So choose wisely, choose the righteous path. Right? Well, not quite.

These blessings and woes that Jesus pronounces in Luke 6, are not quite two separate paths for us to choose, but states of being that describe all of us, individually and collectively. We are full yet hungry, we are rich yet poor, we laugh and weep, and we are praised yet hated. Our lives are meant to exist in such tension, such balance, that could only be described as cross-shaped, as we seek to love God and love neighbour, however brokenly, however ineptly, or however humanly, for we are both saints and sinners, within ourselves and saints and sinner of the same congregation.

Therein lies the good news of Jesus, God accepts us all. God knows that we are incapable of choosing only the righteous path, obeying only the righteous Law, and saving ourselves from that certain doom—evening knowing the catastrophic cliff ahead, we still can't help but sprint towards it, full steam ahead. God knows that leaving it all to our own devices of our own choosing, humanity are more likely to repeat the same mistakes, again and again.

As the Apostle Paul put it so aptly in Romans 7, where he describes our inner most conflict, *“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* (v.19) *“For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.”* (v.23)

Here is the most crucial question that Paul asks in verse 24 of this inner battle, *“Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”* And here is the resolution he provides in the following verse, *“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*

It is through Jesus on the cross, that our sins are forgiven, our bodies redeemed, our souls find peace and rest. A cross-shaped life is to acknowledge the tension, the balance of our innermost conflict. A cross-shaped life is to accept that we are accepted by that which is greater than us. A cross-shaped life is the realization that we are not left to fend for ourselves, that our Lord and saviour is charting the path ahead. He is leading us to the right way; He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

We are disciples learning on the way. And we are apostles being sent out into our families, our community, our country, to the nations, with the Lord Jesus Christ giving us a clear, and unmistakable command: **‘en croix’**.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**