

# What about the woes?

By Adam M. L. Tice | Volume 4.1 Winter 2018

On a recent Sunday I was leading singing for my small congregation, Faith Mennonite Church, in Goshen, Indiana. We were introducing several new songs for a denomination-wide “Great Day of Singing.” As part of the Worship and Song Committee preparing our new hymnal, I helped to prepare the materials, from gathering hymns right down to engraving the music for the brochure.

As text editor and a hymn writer, I tend carefully to the words of our songs. And yet, once those words are voiced by a community of faith they can take on a more profound meaning. My congregation includes a significant proportion of people on the economic and social margins of our community. When we sang “Sing a new world into being / where the homeless find a home,”<sup>[1]</sup> I was facing people who could not take shelter for granted. Some lived in transitional housing owned by the church; some were very recently homeless. Mary Louise Bringle’s text was not an abstraction for our congregation.

## ***Too often churches sing about the poor or to the poor as objects of external ministry. What might it look like instead to sing with the poor?***

Too often churches sing about the poor or to the poor as objects of external ministry. What might it look like instead to sing *with* the poor? In the words of Gustavo Gutierrez, “So you say you love the poor. Name them.” To take this challenge seriously, we must consider not only how we sing about poverty, but also how we sing about wealth. In the language of our hymnody, who are the poor and who are the rich?

Jesus’s economic teaching, and particularly the Beatitudes, can be quite disturbing to the wealthy. One of my seminary professors pointed out that if we look to Luke’s version of that text we cannot simply spiritualize Jesus’s blessings. Luke follows the blessings with corresponding “woe” statements. While it might make sense to promise blessings to the poor “in spirit,” it would be strange to pronounce woe on those who are rich “in spirit.” Instead, in Luke, Jesus is clearly speaking in economic terms—blessing the poor, and warning the rich. The one who came to “preach good news to the poor” also brought some bad news. Can we dare to echo that in our singing?

A quick search of the scriptural indices of some recent hymnals reveals a dearth of hymnody dealing with the “woes.” Settings of the Beatitudes tend to work from Matthew’s version rather than Luke’s. Few hymnals list anything for Luke 6:24-26.

One exception is Graham Maule and John Bell’s “Heaven shall not wait.”<sup>[2]</sup> The hymn appears in the Church of Scotland’s *Church Hymnary* (2005) and in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (2013), among others. While Bell and Maule do not directly paraphrase the “woes,” they offer a present-tense vision of the inverse blessings of Jesus. In this text, the statement “Jesus is Lord” defines the work of

heaven on earth, whether or not humans are on board with the program. Thus it is not up to the poor to “lose their patience” or “the rich to share their fortunes, the proud to fall, the elite to tend the least” in order to bring heaven to humanity. Instead, Jesus has done that work already: “he has championed the unwanted,” and we have seen him “kneel and wash his servants’ feet.”

### [Heaven Shall Not Wait](#)

In “Woes and blessings,”<sup>[3]</sup> Bringle reverses the scriptural order and opens each stanza with the bad news: “Woe to you,” addressing the rich, well-fed, those who laugh, and the proud. In the refrain the passage is described as “a judgment upon us all.” She wrote the text for a tune by Sally Ann Morris, which the two agreed “is forceful and rather commanding.”<sup>[4]</sup> It is worth noting that Bringle embellishes the category of “the rich” as those “who show no grace or pity.”

### [Woes and Blessings](#)

In my text “Blessed are you,”<sup>[5]</sup> the second stanza reflects the “woes,” recasting the phrase as “Ruin awaits the wealthy,” the gluttons, the laughers, and the haughty. Benjamin Brody’s driving tune captures the strident feeling of the text, and then leaps into a swinging refrain on “The doors of heaven are open / and glory is shining through.”

### [Blessed Are You](#)

I qualified “the wealthy” with “who live to serve their greed.” This was something of a capitulation to my fear that the text would be dismissed as too radical if it simply pronounced ruin on the rich without pointing to a related negative attribute deserving of rebuke. Popular writer Rachel Held Evans recently paraphrased the beatitudes in a tweet, including the phrase “cursed are the rich.”<sup>[6]</sup> The post generated so much negative response that she posted the same day, “Turns out, a lot of Christians are offended by the Beatitudes. (Especially Luke’s version.)”<sup>[7]</sup> Do the embellishments that Bringle and I add to the text have the effect of softening Jesus’ pronouncement when a little offense might be in order?

In one of my earliest texts, “God, your knowing eye can see,”<sup>[8]</sup> I was less equivocating in my approach. While the hymns above are voiced in the second person, in this one the congregation sings explicitly to itself: “Woe to us with earthly wealth, / wasting money, land and food.” Chris Ángel’s melody invites a reflective approach appropriate to a confession. Though the text appears in GIA’s *Worship (Third Edition)*, 2011, it has not received widespread use. I suspect that its somewhat scolding, didactic tone diminishes its appeal.

### [God Your Knowing Eye](#)

Shirley Erena Murray's "Forgive us, God, for all the things we waste"[9] uses a similar approach, casting the singers as the rich in need of forgiveness. With her customary vivid language Murray invites us to confess the wastefulness that defines much of western society. She asks God to "convert our currency to care" and to "shake our shallow, plastic ways of thought." In this text (as with "God, your knowing eye can see"), the first person plural voice introduces the possibility of dissonance if the hymn is sung by people experiencing economic hardship or homelessness. Should "the poor" be expected to confess the very societal sins that contribute to their suffering?

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***The question of who can honestly sing what words points to an essential challenge of living as the Body of Christ.***

The question of who can honestly sing what words points to an essential challenge of living as the Body of Christ. Voicing praise, lament, and confession together in song viscerally enacts the unity of the Body. We literally breath and move as one.[10] That Body holds within it the entire range of experience of its constituent parts—wealth and poverty, power and *disempowerment*, security and instability. In the context of corporate song individuals are invited to sing on behalf of the Body as a whole.

While preparing this article I wrote a new text. It is not a paraphrase of the Beatitudes, but the middle stanza references their economic themes: "Peace confounds the wealthy, / peace lifts up the poor." Sally Ann Morris happened to be working on a tune in the same meter at the same time that she sent me for comment. I realized that the tune would be a compelling vehicle for my text, offering the right kind of harmonic struggle for these difficult themes. Her progressions are rich and warm, but they are not simplistic.

[peace-to-you](#)

The texts discussed here do not provide a uniform approach to singing about wealth and poverty. As with all congregational song, context dictates selection. What congregations needs to sing on a given Sunday will vary from church to church. Words of woe and words of blessing are needed to echo the scope of Jesus's teaching, and those who write congregational song should find ways to give voice to both.

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- [1] “Sing a new world into being,” Mary Louise Bringle, 2005; © 2006 GIA Publications, Inc.
- [2] “Heaven shall not wait,” John L. Bell and Graham Maule, 1987; © 1987 WGRG, Iona Community (admin. GIA Publications, Inc.)
- [3] “Woes and blessings,” Mary Louise Bringle, 2006; © 2009 GIA Publications, Inc.
- [4] Sally Ann Morris, *To Sing the Artist’s Praise: Hymn Tunes of Sally Ann Morris*, GIA Publications, Inc., 2009, 109.
- [5] “Blessed are you,” Adam M. L. Tice, 2013; © 2015 GIA Publications, Inc.
- [6] Rachel Held Evans, tweeted on November 26, 2017, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/934787395689598981>
- [7] Rachel Held Evans, tweeted on November 26, 2017, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/934930943986499584>
- [8] “God, your knowing eye can see,” Adam M. L. Tice, 2004; © 2009 GIA Publications, Inc.
- [9] “Forgive us, God, for all the things we waste! (Hymn for a dollar-rich society),” Shirley Erena Murray, © 2010 Hope Publishing Company.
- [10] See Nathan Myrick’s 2017 article for a discussion of the power of music to join bodies into one body: “Relational Power, Music, and Identity: The Emotional Efficacy of Congregational Song,” *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1060>

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