

Blessing

January 27, 2019

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Matthew 5:1-16, *New Revised Standard Version*

1 When Jesus* saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely* on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

13 ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

14 ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

AMEN

Blessed are you who rose early and endured sub-zero temps to be here today, for your reward will be great in heaven!

This morning we join Jesus high above the Sea of Galilee as he gathers his followers to give them a sermon. Well, sort of...

What is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount is really a collection of teachings that Jesus gave throughout his ministry. It is the essence of the years and hours of sermonizing and teaching condensed to 3 or so chapters. Scholars know this because, first, because it is very long – and some of it simply doesn't hang together the way a regular Sunday morning sermon does. Finally, we find lots of the same material in Luke, but it isn't gathered in one place, but spread all around. Matthew wrote a teaching gospel, and it makes logical sense to have these teachings found together in this one spot. These are some of the most familiar verses in scripture and for good reason – they both challenge and comfort.

Matthew is very intentional about the way that Jesus' story unfolds. His baptism shows us that Jesus' time has come, he is led into the wilderness where we discover that Jesus will not be like any earthly leader, and then he selects those who will be closest to him and be his staff. The sermon here shows Jesus doing essential teaching of what it means to follow him.

Matthew sets up the scene by placing Jesus on a mountain, reminding original listeners of Moses receiving of the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai – the faithful would make the connection that the law came from the mountain and now the gospel is from the mountain. In ancient times, a mountain would have represented closeness to God.

We will focus today on the beatitudes. The form of the Beatitudes would have been familiar to original listeners. The form involves a two part affirmation that sums up common knowledge about living a good life. For instance, "Blessed are they who eat the daily recommended allowance of fruits and vegetables, for their cholesterol will be low." Or even, "Blessed are they who use GPS wisely, for they will arrive at the Presbytery meeting on time."

So imagine the shock that must have rippled through the crowd when Jesus turns this form on its head and ascribes blessedness NOT to what the crowd was

expecting -- because none of Jesus' beatitudes clarifies what we might consider the "good life."

Blessed are the poor in spirit...the meek...those who mourn...the peacemakers.

What Jesus is doing here is kind of radical. I think we lose that all these years and translations later.

The language of these blessings is written in the unconditional performative, meaning that they are not merely describing something that already is, but they bring into being the reality that they desire. They are TRUE on the basis of the authority of the one speaking. Jesus is coming to the weak and the lost, the sick and downtrodden and saying, you matter, I see you, you are loved.

When I tucked my children in at night and hugged them and told them I loved them, it was true based on the authority of being their mom. Regardless of what teachers thought of them, or the bullies who made them feel less than -- they were loved -- their lives had meaning.

The word blessing is problematic, too. Often translated happy, that's not really it.

The Greek word for blessing in Matthew is "makarios" which means divine "joy." Joy is different than happiness and isn't dependent, as it's root suggests, happenings or the circumstances of our lives. Makarios is joy that persists, stubbornly, in the face of down-sizing, divorce, death, illness, sorrow, grief, pain. It is the inner core of who we are as followers of Jesus.

Jesus doesn't wait for us to have our acts together to call us blessed. He doesn't wait until we've upped our acts of mercy for the day, nor is he testing our hunger for righteousness or clocking our peace-making hours before conferring blessing. The joy, the blessing, is there for us before we ask. Perhaps the most important thing we can do is recognize, receive it, and pass it along -- amidst our mess.

I believe in the power of blessing. It is a great joy to bless a new baby, or a prayer shawl or a backpack. Just this morning, we gathered around Jan and David, laid hands upon them, and blessed them for the work they will do.

And pronouncing blessing each week in the benedictions is one of the enormous privileges of this vocation. Arms open, enfolding this beloved community,

sending you forth to be God's light in the world. Sometimes it's hard to make it through without tearing up.

And you do know that the ordained are not the only ones that can, should, and, indeed, must pronounce blessing. We can all bless people and things – more than just after sneezes. You do it already – grace before dinner, a kiss and a “drive safely” before leaving the house. But maybe we can be more mindful in this call to bless.

Blessing is one thing we can do to be salt and light in the world. What could be more salty than spewing love when angry and hateful rhetoric seems to be ramping up? What shines more light than a kind word, a thoughtful touch, a recognition of the humanity and suffering of another?

Mindfully blessing another allows us to dip a toe deeper into the mystery of life, and the pause links us to wonder. All it takes is a moment to notice what's right in front of you and to affirm it -- human or otherwise – for its place in the interconnected web of God's world. With or without a tender touch, we speak a word about God or the Holy mystery and about the one before us.

When we started Children's Church many years ago, we intentionally blessed each child before they left the room. We would put hands on shoulders, look each child in the eye and say, “You are greatly loved, go and love others.” Then the children would meet their parents. One day, I dismissed Natalie without this ritual. She was almost at her mother when she turned around, ran back in and up to me saying, “Wait, you forgot my blessing!”

As we close today, I'm going to invite you to bless the person next to you. I'd like you to turn to them, offer a tender touch on the shoulder or forehead (ask if it's okay), look into their eyes and say the words in your heart. It can be as simple as “God loves you and so do I,” or “You are loved, go love others,” or, “Surrounded by God's love, please be safe.” Whatever you want. But no one is leaving without a personal blessing.

BLESS ONE ANOTHER

The world is hungry for blessing. The Bible tells us that we are blessed to be a blessing -- may it be so. AMEN