

BLESSING AND BEING BLESSED

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

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

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

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

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:1-12

David Lose, a professor of homiletics at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, writes about the dangers of falling into a trap when we read these familiar words. He says that it is easy for us to hear these words and to think that Jesus is setting up the conditions under which we are blessed. The trap is to think that these descriptive phrases like “poor in spirit” or “meek” or “merciful” or “pure in heart,” that these are conditions or postures we have to assume if we expect to be blessed. And so we think to ourselves, “I need to be more humble, or more committed to peacemaking in order to be blessed.”

Not that there is anything wrong with being more merciful, or more committed to peace, or having a greater passion for justice. Lord knows we all could use a booster shot in mercy and justice. And Lord knows we *are* blessed by the comfort we receive when we mourn, and by what we can accomplish when we commit ourselves to peace. But what Lose is pointing out here is that we often understand the force of these Beatitudes in the wrong order. That instead of setting out the conditions of being blessed, Jesus is making an announcement. He is not saying when you are poor in spirit, *then* you will be blessed. Or, if you would just be a bit more pure in heart, or merciful, then you would find God’s blessing.

The blessing is not a reward for ethical or pious behavior, and it’s not a reward that awaits us only in another world somewhere over the rainbow. On the contrary, Jesus is making an announcement—“*You are blessed.*” Not because of your poverty of spirit, not because of your grief, not because you deserve it with your efforts to make peace. You are already blessed before all that. You are blessed unconditionally. And you are blessed now, in this world, in this life. The blessing of God comes before you can do anything to earn or deserve it—it comes just from being.

And *that*, according to David Lose, may be where we have a problem with the Beatitudes.

He says, “Very little if anything in our world is unconditional. We’re used to paying for our mistakes, paving our own way, toeing the line and reaping the consequences when we don’t, and so it may not only be unexpected, but downright unsettling and nearly inconceivable to imagine that God behaves differently, showering us with blessing apart from anything we have done, earned, or deserve.”

And then he goes on to say, “But let’s be clear—or at least pay attention to the fact that Matthew is quite clear—Jesus isn’t setting up conditions or terms but rather is just plain blessing

people. All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, extremely vulnerable, and at-the-bottom-of-the-ladder people. Why? To proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be—with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather than the strong and victorious. This is not where citizens of the ancient world looked for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either. If God shows up here, Jesus is saying, blessing the weak and the vulnerable, then God will be everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing.”

(workingpreacher.org, posted 23 January 2011)

The Beatitudes then are not some kind of qualifying entrance exam that you have to pass in order to get into the kingdom of God, but rather a startling announcement that the blessing, the favor, and the love of God is already present. *Right now*, God blesses you. Whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever you have done or left undone. Not only when you are meek, not only after you become poor in spirit, not if you can prove your ability as a peacemaker—right now, every moment, Jesus is saying, “God blesses you.”

So if what David Lose suggests is true, that we have a reluctance to accept this unconditional blessing, that it is more difficult to hear and receive a blessing than to try to achieve it; and if that is true for those of us who regularly hear this announcement, and sing hymns about it—what do you think life is like for those who have not yet heard this, who maybe have never heard that someone blesses them and loves them unconditionally? That is a big part of what we are called to be about, sharing with others, and especially with those who have not yet heard, those words, “God blesses you.” Not said in politeness after someone sneezes, maybe not even said in those particular words.

And we have to be clear, here. This is about more than just being nice, or saying a kind word to a stranger or the person taking your order at the restaurant. This is not just about repeating but embodying the announcement that Jesus makes concerning the disposition of God toward the whole human family. It means that we raise the awareness that God intends to bless us all, and that this means that God values people more than money, more than profits, more than political affiliation, more than nationalism.

Declaring that all people are blessed by God also assumes some concrete forms. It means that we value the well-being of people as well, so that something like health care, and access to the means of health care, is a basic human right and should be available to all, not just the wealthy. It means that no one of any age, of any gender, deserves to be physically, verbally, or emotionally abused. It means that everyone, not just Christians but everyone, has a right to worship or not worship God as they choose, without fear and without coercion. And it means that this unconditional blessing is not just for Americans; God's blessing knows no national borders. And it means that because God blesses everyone indiscriminately, so can we.

To say “God blesses you,” and to really mean it, means that, in one way or another, by our words and by our actions, by our lifestyle, and even by our public policies, we announce that the one who created us all—the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the ones who succeed and the ones who fail—the God who created us all looks down on us all, and says to each one of us: “It's you I bless, it's not the things you wear. It's not the way you do your hair, but it's you I bless. The way you are right now; the way down deep inside you. It's not the things that hide you; not your toys (or your wealth, or your cars and boats, or your religion, or your nationality)—they're just beside you. But it's you I bless, every part of you. Your eyes, your skin, your feelings, whether old or new. And I hope that you remember even when you're feeling blue, (or alone, or persecuted, or misunderstood, or torn by conflict), that it's you I bless, it's you yourself, it's you. 'Cause, it's you I love.” (Apologies to the Rev. Fred Rogers)

Can you take that message to someone in the coming days or weeks? Not just someone you are already close to, or someone who is part of this congregation, but to someone who may not have

ever heard it before. And not with an ulterior motive, not to entice them to join our church, or adopt our faith. Can you find a way simply to announce to someone that they are blessed and loved unconditionally by God, just for who they are. Even if each one of us shares that, in one way or another, with just one other person, we will have made a start on that part of our vision that says we go out to make Christ known.

May you know that you are blessed.