

Backwards Blessing
Matthew 5:1 – 12; 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 31
Sunday, January 29, 2017

What does it mean to be blessed? Someone sneezes and we instinctively say, “Bless you.” But *why*? There are written records of this practice dating as far back as 77 AD. Some people believed that a person’s soul could be ejected from their body when they sneezed. Some believed that sneezing opened your body to the invasion of evil spirits, while others believed that sneezing was the body’s effort to *force out* evil spirits. Some believe that the heart momentarily stops beating when you sneeze, and so they ask God to bless you, that your heart would keep beating so that you could live. National Geographic once reported that when a plague was breaking out in 590 AD, Pope Gregory I ordered that anyone who sneezed be blessed immediately, since sneezing was often the first sign that someone had contracted the plague.¹

So saying, “God bless you,” was motivated by the belief that *something is wrong with you*, so I am going to *invoke God’s favor upon you*. That understanding, while it might seem primitive to us today, can actually help us understand what Jesus is talking about in the Beatitudes.

What does it mean to be blessed? In our world today, what does that look like? *Who do we say is blessed?* People who are successful, who have everything they need. If you have enough money and a good job and a home and a family, “I’m just so blessed.” If you have good health, you hear people say, “I’ve been blessed with good health.” We often associate blessing with

¹Patrick, Bethanne Kelly; Thompson, John Milliken (2009). *An Uncommon History of Common Things*. National Geographic. p. 74.

strength and success and security and prosperity; when everything is going *right* in your life, you are *blessed*.

This word *blessed* that Jesus uses in the Beatitudes, it's the Greek word *makarios*, which also gets translated as, "happy." You will see some translations of the Bible where Jesus says, "*Happy* are those who...." So to be *blessed* means to be *happy*? But what about people who are *not* happy? What about people who are sick and hurting and struggling and poor; people who do *not* have good health or jobs or homes or families; people who are *not* successful or strong or prosperous? Has God *not* blessed them? Would you see a man sleeping on the streets in Philadelphia or a starving child in Africa or parents who lost their child in a bombing in Syria and say, "Blessed?"

This is the way that the world thinks about blessing, that the proof of God's blessing is that you are doing *well*; that you are *happy*; that you are strong and stable and secure. Jesus says something entirely different. He turns that notion completely upside down. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Not those who have a *lot* of spirit, who are *rich* in spirit. "Blessed are those who mourn." Not those who are happy. "Blessed are the meek," those who can't speak up for themselves and get pushed around and taken advantage of. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Not those who are *full* of righteousness. "Blessed are the merciful." Not the *powerful* who can impose their will on others. "Blessed are those who are persecuted, who are hated and lied about." Not those who have it easy and are well-respected.

Jesus' blessing seems to come from this place of, "There is something *wrong* with you, so I am going to invoke God's favor upon you."

A lot of times we read the Beatitudes like a list of things we are supposed to strive to *be*. But who in the world *wants* to be poor in spirit? Who in the world *wants* to mourn? Who in the world *wants* to be pushed around and taken advantage of? Who in the world *wants* to be persecuted and hated and lied about? If you've ever been there before, it does not *feel* blessed. This is not a list of things that we should aspire to be. Jesus is not saying, "If you do this, if you attain these things and aspire to be this, then you will be blessed by God." He is saying, "If you *are* this, if this is the situation you find yourself in, you may not be blessed by the world, but you are blessed by God. If you are poor in spirit or mourning or persecuted or meek, then God's blessing is for you, because you *need* it. The rest of the world might look upon you with scorn and push you away and alienate you and say that you are worthless, but God loves you and values you and favors you and blesses you."

The blessing of God does not look like the blessing of the world. It turns our understanding of what it means to be blessed upside down. Jesus begins his ministry with the announcement that God is on the side of those who have no one else on their side. It is the announcement of God's unconditional love and blessing for the hurting and broken, the oppressed and persecuted, the people that no one else wants. God says, "I want you. Blessed are those who have no reason why they should be blessed. The favor of God is pouring out upon all those who are not favored by the world."

It's like Paul says to the Corinthians, "God chose what is foolish in the world...God chose what is weak and low and despised in the world...so that no one might boast in the presence of God." So that no one could say, "Look what *I* have done! Look what *I* have achieved and accomplished! Look at the blessings that *I* have attained!" If God only worked through the wise and the powerful and the mighty and the respected in the world, it would be like, "Well, of course they can do that. Look at them! They have everything they need." But when God chooses the weak and the low and the despised in the world and works through *them* and pours out God's blessing upon *them*, we look at that and say, "There is *no way* they could have done that on their own. *That* is the power of God at work in them." They can't boast in their own ability. They can only boast in the Lord. They can only say, "Look what God has done in my life!"

The Christians in Corinth had plenty to boast about. Corinth was an important city, often referred to as the "Crossroads of the Mediterranean World." It was a major Roman colony, a center of trade for the whole Mediterranean region, and it became the center of Christianity in Greece. Paul pours out praise on the Corinthians at the beginning of this letter, saying that they are eloquent and knowledgeable and not lacking in any spiritual gift. There are plenty of reasons why others would look at them and say, "They are *blessed*."

But, like we saw last week, Paul tells them that they have lost their center, their focus. They have started boasting in their own wisdom and eloquence and strength and ability; in their own leaders. They have started viewing themselves or others as the source of their blessings, losing sight of Christ and the cross. So that's what Paul does; he points them back to Christ and the

cross as the source of their wisdom and strength and blessing. And that doesn't make sense. A crucified savior doesn't make sense. "Crucifixion was the *opposite* of power. It was a humiliating death reserved for slaves, criminals, and social outcasts. Only the powerless died on the cross."²

Christ empties himself out and places himself alongside the outcasts and the weak and the powerless and the poor and the suffering.

So what does all of this mean for us? Two things. First is that if that is where you find yourself – weak, powerless, suffering, spiritually empty, mourning, pushed around and taken advantage of, hated, talked about, lied about, desperate for justice – then the good news of Jesus Christ is that God is *with* you, God is on your side, God's blessing and favor and love are for *you*, not because everything is going *right* in your life or you *deserve* it, but because something is *wrong* and you *need* it.

The second way this speaks to us is that, if that is where Christ stands – with the weak and the powerless and the persecuted and the suffering – if Christ blesses the poor and the hurting and the outcast, and we are called to follow Christ, to center our lives on Christ, to *be like Christ*, then *we* are called to stand with the poor and the powerless and the outcast and the oppressed; *we* are called to bless the weak and the suffering. And the question we have to ask is, "Are we?" As individuals, as a church, as a nation, are we standing where Christ stands, blessing those

²From *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A* by Walter Brueggemann, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, and James Newsome. Pg. 123.

whom Christ blesses? Because if we aren't standing where Christ stands, we're standing in the wrong place. Are we building ourselves up and boasting in our blessings? Or are we emptying ourselves out like Christ and boasting in the Lord; in what *God* is able to do in us and through us?

Where in the Beatitudes do you find yourself? Are you in a place that needs to *receive* Christ's blessing? Or are you in a place where you can *be* Christ's blessing to those who need to receive it? Either way, whether you *need* it or *give* it, you are *blessed*, because you are standing with Christ.