

Sunday evening we (middler youth and I with some awesome adults) rolled up to Covenant Presbyterian singing and honking at parents joyously greeting one another upon return from Massanetta Middle School Conference in Harrisonburg, VA. While one of us was wondering if the 4 hour drive was worth it in the beginning of the week, he quickly affirmed that YES these 5 days were SO worth it. We spent these days in the Shenandoah Valley singing, dancing, recreating and growing in faith. Our theme was “Blessed Be” and we unpacked Jesus’ sermon on the mount, specifically the beatitudes. We explored many things about the Beatitudes over our 5 keynotes, but overall we came home with two core ideas: 1) We are Blessed as we are, as God created us to be-- not who we show the world we are. And 2) We are Blessed to be a Blessing. These next two weeks we will be unpacking just a small part of this sermon on the mount that we could honestly spend 8 weeks on!

Massanetta was structured with 4 core things: worship, keynote, small group discussion, and workshops. Each workshop (there were 10) focused on a core part of this theme “blessed be” –there was workshop on cultivating curiosity and being attentive to our blessings, mercy, grief, vulnerability and boundary setting, praying in color, creation care and many more. (we each were randomly assigned 4). One that struck me was entitled “#blessed” —it was a hit in more ways than one, but one of the reasons was that we spent time talking about social media. These days there is Tiktok, Facebook, Pinterest, Discord, Snapchat, Marco Polo, Instagram, Twitter, the list goes on. And while many of us in here are from a generation where social media was introduced later in life, our middle schoolers have been born into a world with social media.

We started the workshop looking up some photos that people captioned with #blessed. Now, if you don’t know what a hashtag is let me explain. Putting a hashtag (number sign) in front of a phrase with no spaces provides an indexing of a variety of posts. For example, if every

member who posted a picture about life at St. John's captioned it with "#stjohnsdevon" these photos could all be found in one place if someone looked up the hashtag #stjohnsdevon.

Back to our workshop--we looked up a variety of pictures that people used with the hashtag #blessed—an icecream cone, a new house, new marriage, new baby, a beautiful day at the beach, a big family. What each of these have in common is something these people hope to share with the world, their friends. For some it is a sign of gratitude and being grateful for what you do have in your life.

But what we didn't see is people using the hashtag "blessed" for some negative things, failed my test #blessed, I'm grieving and today was extra hard #blessed, I'm having trouble paying my bills #blessed, I'm not sure I love me #blessed. If you look online at what blessings are they most always correlate with positive things, happy things, ways in which we share with the world our gratitude.

Yet while this is what the *world* shows us as what it means to be blessed, Jesus preached a very different narrative on blessings in the sermon on the mount.

Some of you may have heard of the beloved Dr. Kate Bowler, former professor at Duke Divinity School and author of the famed "Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved". Kate was raised in the evangelical church and spent her time in graduate school studying the Prosperity gospel movement. When Kate was diagnosed with cancer as a young mother, she began to wrestle with these beloved sayings Christians so often offer in one's time of need like "everything happens for a reason"—but what made Kate's book something everyone wanted to read was how it spoke to the depths of the human experience about things that so often don't get talked about in church and in our homes because they are perceived as "negative".

Kate started a podcast, came out with a second book, and this year published a Lenten devotional called “Good Enough”. On her website she has released book clubs, discussion guides, and many more resources. She has created a career finding blessings in the midst of the hard stuff. This summer Kate has been creating viral Instagram posts in her “Summer Blessing Series” Here are some:

- a blessing for when you family disappoints you (and admitting that feels terrible),
- a blessing for when you just need to put one foot in front of the other,
- a blessing for if you are in pain (because so few people let us talk about it),
- a blessing for collective grief (when thoughts and prayer aren’t enough),
- a blessing for when you are running on fumes,
- a blessing when today already feels like too much (and tomorrow doesn’t look good either),
- a blessing to take what you need
- a blessing for when you need to put one foot in front of the other

While Instagram used to be about sharing our lives with one another, it has also become a space to learn, speak truth to power, and speak kindness to ourselves and others. These blessings are for those who are in it—really feeling, and mostly not so great ones.

And Jesus, he did the same thing. While there was no social media in biblical times, people still saw blessings as things that were good that happened to them- a child, wealth, health, status and misfortunes or struggles were a curse, they must have done something wrong to deserve this plight. Yet what Jesus didn’t preach about was blessing those with accomplishments, status, offspring, etc. Jesus spoke to those

that were in the depths, those that were experiencing what it means to be fully human, the peaks and the valleys, the good and the bad. He spoke to the crowds that those in their midst who were the most vulnerable, who were suffering, that they were blessed. And that where they find themselves now, will not be in the future.

This word *blessing* is hard to translate in English in a relatable way, in Greek Makarios can be translated as “greatly honored”. God honors the mourning, those seeking peace, those feeling poor in spirit, the meek, the persecuted. Jesus’ sermon is counter cultural—he is saying that the very things that society glorifies isn’t what makes us blessed, what makes us blessed is living into God’s call as a disciple—and that doesn’t mean a life free of pain or suffering, it means a life filled with vulnerability and authenticity.

What the world glorifies, Christ pays no mind—Christ looks to those the world dismisses, the feelings and plights we want to push down or ignore. The reality is that those he is speaking about in the beatitudes are those who didn’t deserve their situation—at some point in all our lives we are going to find hardship, experience pain, mourn the loss of something. A blessed life doesn’t mean that we get to avoid those things—a blessed life means that no matter what happens in our lives—that who we are, as God’s own...we are blessed. And God knows our pain, our present circumstances will be alleviated. Not because everything happens for a reason, or that we are being taught something that we will know later.

God sent Jesus his only son to live among us on earth not to join in on the happy blessed lives we were living—he came to so that we might know that he too knows our struggles, challenges, and pain living life.

Maybe the Sermon on the Mount is all about Jesus’ lavish blessing of the people around him on that hillside who his world—like ours—didn’t

seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance.

Maybe Jesus was simply blessing the ones around him that day who didn't otherwise receive blessing, who had come to believe that, for them, blessings would never be in the cards.

So I imagine Jesus standing among us offering some new beatitudes:

*Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.*

*Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.*

*Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion.*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.*

*Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction.*

*Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.*

*Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried.*

*Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore.*

*Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.*

*Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet."*

*Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.*

*Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The night-shift street sweepers.*

*Blessed are the forgotten.*

*Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.*

*Blessed are the meek.*

*You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.*

*Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.*

*Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.*

*Blessed are foster kids and special-ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.*

*Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people.*

*Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.*

*Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak.*

*Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven.*

*Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.*

I imagine Jesus standing here blessing us all because I believe that is our Lord's nature. Because, after all, it was Jesus who had all the powers of the universe at his disposal but did not consider his equality with God

something to be exploited. Instead, he came to us in the most vulnerable of ways, as a powerless, flesh-and-blood newborn. As if to say, “You may hate your bodies, but I am blessing all human flesh. You may admire strength and might, but I am blessing all human weakness. You may seek power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability.” This Jesus whom we follow cried at the tomb of his friend and turned the other cheek and forgave those who hung him on a cross. Because he *was* God’s Beatitude—God’s blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.

If you find yourself today feeling the sting of grief, feeling vulnerable, stressed or worried about the future, know that it is Christ who sees you and calls you. Blessed, not simply because you will soon no longer experience that anymore—but because no matter what happens or where you find yourself...nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen and Amen.