

Blessed to Be
by Ridgley Joyner
Matthew 5:1-16

Next week I will get to see my niece Laine and nephew Beckett for the first time in a year. Excited is an understatement. I always relish in them coming to cheer “Aunt Ridge” on as she and 350 other cyclists embark on a bike ride to “da beach” every July for the Alzheimer’s Association.

One of my favorite memories with Beckett was (obviously) his toddler years. He was a sponge—he still is, as you know. Since the moment I met him I was singing him children’s songs about the Bible and how much God loved him. Between his aunt and his church preschool He was an expert at the “wee sing” greatest hits by the time he left the nursery.

One song in particular he really latched on to is this little light of mine, and I have this video that shows up on my google photos feed every year of him sitting in his high chair shoving a pb&j in his mouth while singing with me: This little light of mine. Except, well at this point, Beckett wasn’t talking much so he had key words—I’d sing it and he’d join in when it was his time.

I’d say—This little light of _____, I’m gonna let it _____, This little light of _____, I’m gonna let it _____, this little light of _____, I’m gonna let it _____, let it _____, let it _____, let it _____.

And of course as a toddler, Beckett’s favorite word was NO so...his favorite verse was Hide it under a bushel—NO!

A classic for sure. In 2018 folks at St. John’s *made* a VBS curriculum called-- Let your light shine—it honestly was one of my favorites because...well we made it! Sarah Duncan made tshirts, Darien designed a mural that the kids created in one of our Sunday school rooms, we collected flashlights for Puerto Rico after they had a terrible hurricane. Our theme verse was focused on this part of Jesus’s sermon on the mount. And our scripture reading this morning.

Now, if you missed last week, today is part two of our sermon series on the beatitudes. Why the beatitudes you ask? Well, it’s not in the lectionary for this Sunday. This passage often appears around Epiphany when we are focusing on light right after Christmas. We are returning to the beatitudes these two Summer Sundays because this was the scripture passage our middle school youth explored on this Middle school conference two weeks ago. They joined 3 other churches from our presbytery at the Massanetta Springs Middle School Youth Conference.

For those 5 days in the Virginia countryside, we spent time as participants in the 100th youth conference at this PCUSA Camp and Conference center Massanetta. It was a beautiful and safe space where our kids canoed, played in the spring, went on walks, played gaga ball,

worshipped, danced, sang and last but not least—learned about God through this portion of Jesus’ sermon on the mount in Matthew.

In this gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the teacher, as evidenced in the importance of the sermon on the mount. He begins his ministry with a three chapter sermon on righteousness-Matthew’s Jesus focuses on holy living and what it means to be a follower of Him.

Chapter 5 begins with Jesus retreating to a mountain top for the sermon. This is symbolic because, while Jesus has in the past been amongst the crowds, he is choosing to get to a higher point, one in which he can see all who he is speaking with. Where Jesus was believed to be during this sermon, he was able to see the “big” picture—across a large distance, and he could see the disciples, as well as those who wish to be seen in society.

And as we learned last week, Jesus began his sermon with a counter cultural claim that the least of these—those in society who were suffering or experienced misfortune—were blessed. That blessing didn’t mean wealth, an easy life, offspring, status, approval. Blessing someone who is suffering means that Christ knows their plight, their pain. That who they are isn’t defined by their present circumstances. And that there will be a time in the future in which they will experience mourning, persecution, poor spirit no longer. To be blessed is to be known and loved by God, as you are, as God created you to be.

Christ not only knows our pain and calls us blessed, but our very selves as Children of God, no matter what we do—*who we are, who God made us to be—is blessed. No strings attached.*

So this week—we are reminding ourselves of this passage so that we can remember that great good news once more—but also reading a couple verses farther. Because what he says next matters and gives insight on what we do with our new understanding as blessed children of God.

Jesus says:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In 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

You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth. He doesn’t say truly I tell you: you will become the light of the world and the salt of the earth-no, he says right now as you are—You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Two things made by God that are not rare, but bring so much purpose to life. Ordinary elements that are essential to human life—life giving.

Salt, we may know of this as the very thing that preserves and seasons-that brings to life or keeps things alive. Salt in the ancient world was used for various purposes for preserving, seasoning, fertilizing soil, sacrificing, covenanting, purifying and signifying loyalty.

Light—this is interesting because in scripture so often, Jesus was defined as a light, whose presence among us would bring light into the world and shed light upon us. And yet here, Jesus is saying that the disciples, that WE are the light of the world. What was once our blessing has become a blessing that shouldn't be hid under a bushel, but one that begs to be bestowed to others.

What follows Jesus' very personal message to those he calls blessed, he reminds them that yes who they are—at their very core is greatly honored and loved by God, blessed, happy. But that also who we are are people who share the blessing with the world.

Now more than ever we are living in a world filled with greed, heartbreak, betrayal, oppression and grief. And now more than ever we need to hear Christ's words to us—that who we are—who God made us to be is blessed. *And that is nothing we can earn.* BUT that isn't where it ends—it is a beginning. We are blessed so that we may BE a blessing. Discipleship begins at experiencing God's unconditional love for us and being so grateful that we can't hardly keep it in. After all, we are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Let us not take that lightly.

The anxiety and fear of our time is palpable, and some would say darkness feels like the norm more than light. Collective grief after one more school shooting, inflation and prices on the rise, the ground you stand on seeming like it just keeps shifting. More diagnoses, more job insecurity, watching parents age far too quickly for our liking. It is hard to know what to do when you're just paralyzed by just one more hard thing, finding yourself wondering when the upswing will begin—when is the peak, enough with the valleys.

So, it's hard to hear Christ's words—you are blessed—to be a blessing. You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world like a city on a hill. Jesus is calling us to stand up in the midst of the darkness, to know we are not alone, and to BE the light. While this feels daunting, I want us to return to toddler Beckett's favorite line

Hide it under a bushel ---NO.

Christ tells us that we are like a city on a hill, but then he goes on to share a quick example that is a bit different than a city on a hill—when you are in a house, you don't cover up a light with a bushel, but instead you put it on a lampstand...and by doing so—it illumines the whole house. While it is daunting to think about the fact that WE are the Light of the world for God (not anything we achieve or work toward), simply being who God made us to be illumines one space. And collectively, together we are a city on a hill for all the world to see.

Friends, it is at this table that we remember we are fortunate, blessed to be loved by a God who knows the darkness of our pain and suffering. At this table we taste and see, and remember God's grace that overflows for us. May we also leave this table here today remembering that our response to God's grace is gratitude by shining our light to the world. We are blessed because we are God's, and God made us to not simply hold it in, or under a bushel

but to share ourselves with the world to bring Glory to God. Let us get to work being who God made us to be.