

“Blessed”

1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Matthew 5:1-12
(January 29, 2023)

On day, Jesus went up a mountain, sat down with his disciples, and began to teach them. And this is what he said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” What follows is a whole series of blessings, words of Jesus which continue to touch our hearts and lives.

These Beatitudes are familiar to many of us. And they’re no less powerful with the passing of time. They continue to speak across the ages.

There’s so much in them. And they’re worth studying in detail. Maybe sometime we’ll do just that. But today we’ll take them all together, and allow these blessings that come from Jesus to wash over us, like the refreshing, life-giving waters of our baptism.



When did you last receive a blessing? What were the circumstances? Are there any that stand out from all the rest?

It’s been a blessing for Lindsay and me, these last few months, to spend time with our new granddaughter. What a delight she is! It’s come as something of a surprise! Who knew that having a grandchild could be such a gift?

I remember, years ago, summers on my Uncle’s farm – that too was a blessed experience. I grew up in the city, but looked forward to spending summer days in the fields and open spaces. There’s a beauty there, and a freedom. There were so many things to learn, and experience.

At the end of August it was time to go home again. I was sad to leave. Before I did, Uncle Donald took my hand and said how good it was for me to be there. He even took out his cheque-book and made out a sum of money for me. He said the work I’d done had made a contribution, and he wanted to say thank you.

There were tears streaming down my face. Because it was *me* who needed to say thank you. The whole summer had been a blessing. And these awkward words at the end of it were a gift of abundant grace.



Blessings often happen at the end of things. At points of departure. When it’s time to say good-bye. We speak of being blessed by another person, or the time we’ve spent together.

“Remember Dan?” someone asked at the Curling Club the other day. “He was such a good guy!” Dan was our skip, but died a few years ago from cancer.

“He sure was,” I concurred. And I almost said to my friend, “And so are you.” But I didn’t, because I thought it might sound corny. Why can’t we bless each other in the moment, instead of waiting?



Blessings can be given informally, between friends. Or they can be part of a formal ritual. Like when the pastor stands up at the end of the service, and raises his or her hands, and sends the congregation on their way with God’s blessing.

I remember the minister who married us, taking our hands after we'd made our vows of commitment, and invoking God's blessing upon our marriage.

Blessings can be given at meal time, over the food we eat. In doing so we acknowledge with gratitude the One who provides our daily bread.

At the end of a day, we might take a moment to consider what has transpired within it. And, if it's been a *good* day – when work has been accomplished, companionship has been enjoyed, perhaps some unexpected kindness has been received – we might pause to say “thank you.”



The Grace, by Michael Peter Ancher (1849–1927)



But here's a question: Can we feel equally blessed at the end of a bad day? By which I mean a day that has been challenging, or difficult. A day when we've suffered some kind of failure or loss. The kind of day when nothing seems to have gone the way that we wish.

Feeling blessed at the end of a *good* day is easy. Feeling blessed at the end of a *bad* day is another thing altogether.

What is it that's troubling you now? I hope you don't mind me asking. It's not that I want to expose some unpleasant business in your life. What I want, is for you to find a connection with these Beatitudes that come from Jesus.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus said. And when I hear that I think of someone who may be downtrodden and doesn't have a lot of spirit left. Their spirit's been diminished, trampled, taken away. But Jesus says that even in that poverty, they're blessed.

Or listen to this: “Blessed are those who mourn.” Imagine a person grieving, sorrowing, full of lament. Losing a loved one, losing a way of life. Mourning the state of the world. But Jesus says they are blessed.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” I don't often think of hungry people being blessed. Because even when I'm just a little bit hungry I begin to get on edge.

And hungering for *righteousness*, longing for God's goodness and justice to fill the earth ... Well, the people who long most for that, I think, are the very ones who do not have it. People who struggle to get a fair shake in life. But Jesus says that even in that, they are blessed.

We can talk about the precise meaning of each and every blessing Jesus pronounces. I don't want you to think I've said the final word on any of these. What I want us to do is notice what an *odd* set of blessings these are: Those we least expect are the ones most blessed by God.





Ferenczy, Károly, 1862-1917. Sermon on the Mount, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56296> [retrieved January 28, 2023].

Take a look at this depiction of the sermon on the mount by a Hungarian artist. He makes no attempt to be historically accurate. He's not painting first century folk in Palestine. He's showing the people he knows sitting down on a hillside, in the tall grass, overlooking a village. See the thatched roof among the trees?

Who do you see in this picture? There are all ages: older folk, middle aged, teenagers and young children. Some appear to be well dressed, like that gentleman with a tall hat and the woman in dark clothes sitting behind him.

Others, like the folks in the middle, appear to be of modest means. They're dressed in humble, loose-fitting clothes. And one of them has a straw hat. And there is Jesus among them, over on the right.

What strikes me is the inclusive nature of this gathering. There are all sorts and conditions of people present. And I can just hear Jesus beginning his talk by telling them they are blessed. "Blessed are you ..." he says. "Whether you realize that or not."



The Sermon on the Mount is one of five sets of sustained teaching in the Gospel of Matthew. Paralleling Moses' five books of the law, Jesus gives his own version of Torah, or instruction, for living God's Kingdom way. Here, in this first section of teaching, Jesus begins with the Beatitudes.

And I think this is noteworthy. Jesus begins with a word of blessing! He could have started with something else. But he didn't. He wants his disciples to know, before he says anything else, that they are blessed by God.

Yes, even those who may not think of themselves as being particularly blessed. Even those who may be going through a very difficult time in their lives. *Especially* those. "God is with you! God's blessing is upon you!"



The people who were attracted to Jesus' message, the ones who became his followers, were not generally the well to do. Quite the opposite, actually. They were fishermen, with roughened hands and sunburned faces. There was a tax-collector, who bore the shame of his occupation. There were several women. Not all of them came with reputation intact.

And there were children. Remember that time they brought little children to Jesus? The disciples wanted to send them away. But he said, "Let them come to me. It is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven *belongs*."



Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553): Christ blessing the children.

And what did he do next? He laid his hands on them and blessed them! (Matthew 5:13-15)



I think of those words we read earlier this morning from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

"God chose what is foolish in the world ... what is weak in the world ... what is low and despised in the world ..." Paul's not trying to insult them. He's just pointing out who they really are.



There's a promise in every one of Jesus' blessings. Did you notice that? The poor in spirit are promised the kingdom of heaven. The ones who mourn are promised comfort. The meek will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." That doesn't sound very blessed, does it? But at that very moment in our lives when we feel most God-forsaken we're told that God is with us! God's blessing is upon us.

This condition we find ourselves in will not last forever. God will have the final say. Sorrows now, in our fallen, broken, tumbling-down world. But joy in the *fullness* of God's coming kingdom.



And this is more than just talk. This is what Jesus lived!

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus began his ministry by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18-19)

In other words, he didn't just speak about blessing, he lived it. Jesus healed the sick, embraced the poor, freed the ones held captive. He lifted up the meek of the earth. He lived God's justice, standing against oppression. He became the peacemaker for the whole creation.

Jesus preached the kingdom, and *lived* the kingdom! He brought God's promised future into present reality. Kingdom not just then, in some far-off future land, but also here and now, in the brokenness and sorrow of our world.

His words, his hands, his feet, his whole life became a blessing. And so can ours!



"What would happen," asks the writer Debie Thomas, "if we who profess faith in Jesus actually followed his example, and made it our first priority to bless others as we have been blessed? To lead with blessing? To make blessing our most visible and foundational gift to those around us? What would happen to

our hearts, to the Church, to the world, if we offered blessings to our neighbors as generously as God offers blessings to us?"¹

I've been asking myself this question as I've entered this not-quite retired stage of my life. How can I be a blessing? To my now-adult children? To my granddaughter? To my brother in Ontario? To this congregation? To the whole church? To my neighbours on either side? To the people I meet in daily life?

How might I be a blessing to them? How might my life, following the example of Jesus, embody God's generosity and love? Is there something I could say? Or do? Is there something I could give?

Put it this way: Having received God's blessing through Jesus, how might I now *share* that blessing with others? Especially with those who need it most?

You know what? The way you answer that question – along with the grace of God – might just make all the difference in the world! Amen.

¹ By Debie Thomas. Posted 26 January 2020. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2511-the-blessing-and-the-bite>, Accessed Jan. 24, 2023.