

Scriptures

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

What a Blessing

The reading of the beatitudes struck me differently this time. Maybe its because I just took a trip to a Third world country, maybe its because I am so very weary of Donald Trump already, maybe its because world politics is scaring me lately in a way it has never scared me before, and likely it is because with all that is going on in the world I am baffled by the polarization that people seem to accept as truth. I don't see the world as black and white. I grew up in a faith and a world in which I was taught and believed that if I was simply a good, faithful, moral person who had Jesus in their heart all would be well. I didn't believe that for long to be honest. When between the ages 15 and 17 you are faced with five major untimely deaths of people you love its hard to hold onto the belief that all will be well if you just follow a certain set of rules.

I'd like to say I've let go of those assumptions but just like most of us I often try to control my fate - it's all we can do to not loose hope most days. I try to be a good person, most days I eat right, try to get enough exercise and sleep, I take my vitamins and pray often - I think I've got it all under control - kind of.

I have learned though that all we can do is try. There are no guarantees. And maybe the beatitudes tries to explain this to us a little. Maybe Jesus is saying - life is going to be hard so you are going to need to find the blessings even in everything, even in the dark hours. Otherwise you will loose hope and all will not be well.

Every community has its own definition of what constitutes blessedness. We may call it something else like "the good life" or "success." But we all have definitions of what it means to have made it, and usually it's not being poor in spirit, or mourning, being meek or pure in heart or thirsting for righteousness and all the rest. In our world, when we think of someone who is blessed we most often think of someone who is wealthy or powerful or famous or successful or beautiful or enviable. Blessing, at least according to the standards of this world, is most often of the material kind. The people that Jesus says are blessed are for the most part not things of life that we would sign up for. They are not the blessings our culture tells us to look for or strive for. Most of the blessed in this passage are people that get judged or looked down upon, not blessed.

As I am writing this sermon I'm sitting in my office waiting to do a memorial service for a good friend of many of you, so when I read Jesus' words I wondered a little - really Jesus, these things, these people are blessed? The poor in spirit, the meek, the contrite, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst to be good and upright people. Those who are persecuted?

It's strange how the words of Scripture strike us differently in different seasons of life. Some days I might just accept this. Today for me it's a wrestle. For a colleague who is mourning the loss of her father these scriptures at one point started to make her blood boil. Why? because if you are someone who is poor, or persecuted, or mourning, or meek, or hungering and thirsting for righteousness - trying with all your might to make life work to get a glimpse of the good life then these words are trite - they jump off the page and they cut like a knife.

When I think of war-torn streets or a mother burying her child. I think of parents dying and leaving their babies too early. I see the faces of the poverty stricken. I have a vision of a mother that Macky and I saw as I jumped out of his brother's air-conditioned car that we had borrowed to take Malaya to the hospital in Manila. We had wrestled through an hour's worth of traffic just to get a few blocks, I'm cuddling my sick babe worried as we try to get her the care she needs. I'm more patient than I likely would be here at home - because you just have to be in Manila or you will go insane and yet I am feeling a little lost, and homesick for our clean air and pristine streets, for water I can drink from the tap and the only bug I see is a fruit fly and nothing I need to worry about. Yes - I'm ready for the first world life again on this day. And then as I jump out of this beautiful car we see a mother holding a babe no more than a few weeks old pry her way out of a overcrowded, hot, sweaty, dirty Jeepney (their rickety version of a bus - you only take it if you have no choice) and I realize how blessed I am, how wealthy I am, how many resources I have. And so today as I envision that mother battling not only for her child's life but also for her own I think - who do you call blessed Jesus?

Yes I know Matthew says Blessed are the "Poor in spirit" but Luke says "Blessed are the poor" - maybe Matthew had the same wrestle I did so he needed to adapt the words to make them work for him - who knows...

And then how about those who mourn? How could Jesus say that there is any sort of blessing in emotional upheaval? How could Jesus call that person who has aching grief seeping into her joints until she's paralyzed with exhaustion, blessed?

Rev. Carol Howard Merritt writes in a time of grief "Why would Jesus have the audacity to say this? Where is the blessing in this raw, open wound? Is the blessing upon those who mourn simply hinged upon this future hope that they will be comforted? Or is there, somehow, a blessing in the midst of it? Is there some blessing in the grief and the sadness that washes over me?"

Of course, Jesus knew about grief. Even in this small account, Jesus had come from healing. The crowds surrounded him, they pulled upon him, and he saw the broken and the wounded. He saw the mothers with dying children and the children who had been left parentless... And when we read that Jesus bore the sins of the world, I imagine they weighed heavily upon him--the crushing burden of our cruelty toward one another. And in this moment when this teaching rises up from him, I wondered, did it emerge from his powerless, burdened mourning? Did he feel that exhaustion and that bit of pain creeping into his joints? Is that why he left the crowds and sat down? Did he just need to gather with his friends and reflect on how upside down the world seemed to him at that moment? It is as if in these words, he sees the needs--the hunger, the thirst, the longing--and, somehow, he sees blessing in all of it.

Howard Merritt continues Perhaps we can't even understand these words until we become poor or meek or contrite. Perhaps we don't know what they mean until our stomachs ache with a roaring hunger and our tongues stick to the roof of our mouths with thirst. Maybe, maybe we cannot understand the words when we feel the most blest. Perhaps they only make sense to us when we hit rock-bottom. When we're so ashamed of what we did the night before that our lips tremble. When we are about to lose the home we are raising our children in. When we finally realize that we have no control over our addiction. When we are in such mourning, that we stare at the ground as we walk and we cannot look up. *When you are so desperate you even resort to prayer to find a little comfort.*

... Could it be that there is something good in the anguish and grief in the valley of the shadow of death? The problem with a person's death is that you don't just lose the flesh and the bones, but it's also all of the hopes and dreams that you have for that person, that you have for your relationship.

Yet, in the absence of a loved one, there is love there. When we are facing a chasm of great magnitude, there is the possibility of a different sort of reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace.”¹

We saw it yesterday. It was a sad day and yet a most joyful, blessed day as we celebrated the life of Linda Harris. What a gift, what a presence. Linda seemed to be the kind of person who took Micah 6:8 literally. “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” A humble kind, justice seeking person is exactly who we celebrated. And it was a blessing, a gift to celebrate and dare I even say mourn her life. I had so many folks after the service come and share with me stories of how Linda and Trevor have touched their lives, what a support and gift they were - what a blessing. Blessings can happen even as we mourn. Blessings happen even when we are poor and when we hunger and thirst for righteousness and when we seek peace and mercy, even when we struggle and suffer and are persecuted. But I'm not sure they are always as automatic as Jesus seems to present. I believe we can offer them to one another, and I believe we can choose to see the gifts in the midst. That is the kind of person we heard of yesterday, someone who didn't always have an easy life, but always looked for the love and light and blessing in every situation.

I think cultures that are not as wealthy and entitled as ours is, are better at this. One of the things I absolutely love about going to the Philippines is having parties with them. We had more parties in the time we were away than I have had in a couple years here in Canada. We had 4 birthday party celebrations - now in my family we will put everyone in the month of January together - not there. At least last month Everyone got their own party :). Some are more extravagant than others but there is always an equal dose of love and thanksgiving. Then we celebrated New Years - you would think these people had the most amazing life ever, the way they rang in the year - in their two bedroom 600 square foot home that houses at least 10 people. In that space we celebrated lives gifts and blessings abundantly.

¹ Howard Merritt, the Rev. Carol, Blessed Are Those Who Mourn 2011

I remember towards the beginning of our marriage Macky facing a bit of a cultural struggle. We had been in the midst of a lot of complaining about things that to him seemed mundane. He confessed he was homesick for people who simply celebrated each day for they were alive - and if they had a home to live in/ or even a simple roof over their head and food to eat - well they celebrated that all the more because their blessings were abundant. Stereo typically Filipinos are giving people - and they are - because they give from the little they have and they support and care for one another in ways that would baffle the average North American. The things we debate, argue and despair about can seem ridiculous to them because they know what it is to struggle and almost all of them have been there. Maybe that is what Jesus means - maybe they are more blessed.

Perhaps the beatitudes have more than one purpose. Perhaps for some the purpose is to know they are blessed and perhaps for others it is a call to action. A call to a way of discipleship and living.

Perhaps in the political culture in which we live today the Beatitudes call upon the church to make Jesus present and visible and manifest when the world tries desperately to silence those who are less than, and those who speak the truth... The Beatitudes are a call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines. God cares for the meek, the poor, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted, those who hunger and thirst, and those who mourn. And these days, we need this reminder. When our hope for the future might have been dimmed. When we think what we do and what we say and what we believe does not matter. Its time to remember that we are required to live justly, kindly, lovingly, humbly.

Jesus teaches us to see how God calls blessed those who are down and out, distressed by their circumstances, passionate about promoting righteousness and working for peace, or persecuted for doing the right thing. Those we don't often perceive as valuable are precisely those God chooses to bless and honor and love. For God reveals God's self to us most clearly and consistently at our places of deepest need.

What if we recognized that God always comes where we least expect God to be – amid our brokenness – in order to bless that which the world refuses to bless, to love what the world calls unlovable, and to redeem that which the world does not believe merits saving? And what would it be like if we saw the world with new eyes, able to perceive in the needs of others not a nuisance or even something to be pitied but rather as marks of blessedness to which we are privileged to attend?

David Lose writes “in this passage, Jesus points us to recognize that God's kingdom isn't a place far away but is found whenever we honour each other as God's children, bear each other's burdens, bind each other's wounds, and meet each other's needs. To be human is to be inescapably fragile and vulnerable, and it turns out that the surprising character of God isn't to reject these things but rather to gather them all into a divine embrace.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the pure in heart, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and who are persecuted on Christ's behalf. It's quite a list. And

blessed are those, we might add, who see the blessings of God in their neighbour's need and give thanks they were privileged to meet them."²

May you be blessed and be a blessing
Amen

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-4a-recognizing-blessing/>