

the Rev. Karen Millard
Squamish United Church

January 30, 2011

Scripture Readings:

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are You

I read this poem by Ann Weems this week and it struck me as the perfect kind of blessing for today. So and I read it I invite you to imagine yourself at the breakfast table with family and friends.

To You - Ann Weems

This morning I was toasted by a two-year-old
who raised her orange juice glass to mine and said, "To You!"
She brought the morning; she moved a mountain;
She brought flowers out of barren land and sunlight from darkness.
What a way to start the day - affirmed and celebrated!

Remember to celebrate those across the breakfast table.
When did you last tell them they are precious?
You told them to take out the trash, to make their beds,
But did you tell them they are cherished?
You told them they were wrong; you told them to hurry up;
But did you tell them they are beautiful?
We celebrate events or days or heroes,
But take for granted the joy of the familiar.

So here's to you, familiar faces at my breakfast table!
Here's to smiles, sleepy kisses, and theological questions at dawn!
Here's to unbrushed teeth, unmade beds, and unpicked-up
clothes!
Here's to dirty tennis shoes with one blue sock and one brown!
Here's to last night's scores and news told before I read it!
Here's to my cold cup of coffee, to the lunch forgotten!
Here's to the little girls who wants ice cream with her eggs!
Here's to the daddy who thinks that's funny!
Here's to the man who loves us so and lets us know!

I cherish, you who breakfast with me
You are sun in my rain - sustenance and star.

O Lord, free us to thank God for each other!
Free us to click orange juice glasses clear across your Kingdom
In every family and in the larger family of the gathered church.
Here's to you, saints who remembered to love!
Here's to those who heal, teach, listen, comfort;
Who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give a cup of cold water,
Weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice,
And stand by to pick us up and brush us off!
Here's to the peacemakers and the prophets -
Their justice, their mercy, their humility,
Their strength that does not falter!
Here's to those who have been freed to free us,
To their song that never ends,
To the saints who keep on dancing!
Here's to you!

Let us Pray...

David Lose wrote "There is a trap hidden in the Beatitudes that I know I have fallen into countless times, and perhaps you have too. The trap is as simple as it is subtle: believing that Jesus is setting up the conditions of blessing, rather than actually blessing his hearers... He goes on to say "When I hear the Beatitudes, it's hard for me not to hear Jesus as stating the terms under which I might be blessed. For instance, when I hear "Blessed are the pure in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," I tend to think, "Am I pure enough in spirit?" or "I should try to be more pure in spirit." Or, when I hear "blessed are the peacemakers...", I think, "Yes, I really should be more committed to making peace." At least with "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," I have the assurance of knowing that on those occasions when I am mourning I will be comforted. But, to be perfectly honest – and if you'll pardon the pun – that's relatively small comfort because the truth is I don't want to mourn, and hearing this beatitude doesn't make me any more eager for additional mourning. (Ditto for being persecuted!)"¹

It has been true for me many times in reading the beatitudes I have started to list the ways in which I am most lowly, and fear for the places in which I'm not. I hate the idea that I'll be blessed if I'm persecuted. I don't want to be persecuted anymore than the next guy. There have been times when I have felt ridiculed, or set apart because of who I am, especially after I got the title Rev. but really I didn't do that so that I could be blessed and persecuted. So when I read the beatitudes I sometimes wonder if I am worthy of being blessed, have I been meek, and humble enough, have I mourned enough? The list goes on. I'm not sure why I do that. When I pray for all of you I don't pray that you might have more suffering - although I may pray that you find blessing out of the suffering that you endure. I certainly don't pray that you might be poor or persecuted. I'll admit I have most likely prayed for some others to learn humility (which

¹ Lose, David workingpreacher.org Posted 01.23.11

probably says more about my lack of humility than anything). I know I have definitely prayed that we might hunger and thirst for righteousness. But never would I offer a blessing hoping that a person might feel ridiculed or oppressed by it. So why would I think that would be the prayer, motivation or blessing of Jesus?

Which is why David Losen's commentary caught my spirit this week. He wrote in the midst of his frustration and confusion around the beatitudes that he began "to wonder whether our difficulty with the Beatitudes isn't symptomatic of a larger problem most of us have; namely, that we are far less eager to be blessed than God is to bless us... Maybe it's more that we have a hard time believing God wants to bless us in the first place. It may be that our picture of God is distorted, that we can only imagine God as a stern, demanding law-giver, and so it seems out of character for God to bless without requirement. This isn't the primary picture of God in the Bible, but it may be the one that we were taught and have a hard time letting go.

Or maybe it's not that we don't know God well enough to recognize God's grace, maybe it's that we know ourselves too well to feel worthy of that grace. After all, we are intimately familiar with our faults and limitations, our insecurities and failures. And knowing ourselves this well – and knowing that God knows us even better! – we may find it hard to believe God loves us unconditionally. Very little if anything in our world is unconditional. We're used to paying for our mistakes, paving our own way, toeing the line and reaping the consequences when we don't, and so it may not only be unexpected, but downright unsettling and nearly inconceivable to imagine that God behaves differently, showering us with blessing apart from anything we have done, earned, or deserve."²

The beatitudes isn't a list of conditions it's pure blessing and promise. Jesus is telling us about the very character of God. God cares about these people who need care. The people God blesses isn't limited to what we think. God blesses all people even the meek and mild, struggling and weary. God even blesses those who are persecuted for not being who we think they should be. God offers grace, mercy and pure blessing to the poor not just the rich, to those who are mourning not just celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather than just the strong and successful. Blessings are not arriving "where citizens of the ancient world look for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either. If God shows up here, Jesus is saying, blessing the weak and the vulnerable, then God will be everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing."³

Lose wrote "When I was in graduate school, one of my teachers, Dr. Cleophus LaRue, would regularly address me as "Dr. Lose." Eventually it made me uncomfortable enough that I said to him, "But Dr. LaRue, I haven't earned my doctorate yet. I don't think you should call me that." "Dr. Lose," he patiently responded, "in the African-American church we are not content to call

² IBID

³ IBID

you what you are, but instead call you what we believe you will be!" Blessing. Unexpected, unsettling, nearly inconceivable, yet blessing nonetheless."

So perhaps the question is not who and how do I need to be to get these blessings but rather will I accept the blessings that have been showered upon me? God loves you, and see's you as worthy, precious, whole.

I am going to invite the choir to sing now (if you would like to join you are welcome). As they sing know that you are blessed by the most holy God.

Be still and know that I am God...

Hear what God is saying to you:

blessed are you
who are lonely
who are struggling
who feel lost
who feel unloved, unworthy, unknown

blessed are you
who are loved
who feel alive
who feel like you are in the prime of your life

blessed are you
who are gay, straight, bisexual and transgendered
who are white, black, red, tan
who are bullied, outcast or teased
who are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh

Be still and know that I am God....

In the middle ages when someone sneezed you said God bless you fearing that they may have the plague. We say that mantra to this day. I would like us to take the opportunity to reclaim those words to signify joy not fear, delight not disease, New life over death. I invite us to "reclaim not only the beatitudes but an essential element of the Christian life itself: the insight that God is a God who delights to create, bless, and redeem, and the reminder that we are God's own beloved and blessed children."

I invite you now to bless one another (just as we would in the passing of the peace only I invite you to say "God bless you.")

- You are loved by the most holy God - made in God's image. God Bless You!