

Releasing God's Blessing – 1. Releasing God's Blessing
Matthew 5:1-12
November 26, 2023
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This weekend, like many of you, I gathered with my family for Thanksgiving. About 30 of my extended family came together. We ate, talked for hours, played some cards, and sang. It's one of my favorite family traditions. My mom plays piano, and we pull out hymnals. We sing some of my Grandma's favorites, a few the little kids will know, and inevitably we stumble thru a song with too many high notes. It's a moment of blessing to hear four generations singing together songs older than any of us.

Lately though, when we sing, I find myself getting choked up. Because it is a special thing we share as a family, and a unique tradition to have. And I know our time together is limited, next year, there might be another empty seat or two around the table.

That's the thing about moments of blessings- they almost always are bittersweet. There is joy in the moment, mingled with grief- missing those no longer with us, and holding tenderly the things that are broken or will change.

We're in the middle now, of this holiday season, this stretch between Thanksgiving and Christmas. And for many of us, even while they are good and joyful holidays, this season is hard.

Some of us gathered for turkey dinners for the first time without someone we love. Some of us are worried about how we'll manage the strain in our time and finances, both stretched thin. Some of us are grieving already the changes this next year will bring: moving from a family home, deteriorating health, the a death of someone we love, or a relationship that's ending. And some of us, for the first time, spent the holiday alone.

And when these hardships and grief collide with festive seasons of joy and gratitude, it can feel really hard to feel blessed. This is partly due to our interpretation of blessedness. Photos circulating social media use the hashtag #blessed, while showing happy, smiling faces. *I am guilty of this too! I posted a picture of the five of us at Thanksgiving too. We all have full smiles and full plates, and everyone looks happy. My boys are adorable. But not 5 seconds after the photo, all three were upset or crying. Our youngest declared it the "worst day ever", our middle was mad because he asked for mashed potatoes again and no one was listening, and our oldest was just mad that everyone was mad!*

That's the reality, but it isn't what we post, is it? When we think being blessed is only about being happy, or perfect. And when things are imperfect, we feel like that blessing has passed us by.

But what if we changed our expectations of what it means to be blessed? What if blessings did not equal perfection. What if being blessed was instead a posture that recognizes the beauty amid the brokenness.

What if, you are blessed, not when everything is happy. But when life is really hard, and your grief seems too much to bare, and still you found a way to be present , to show up with all that you carry. I think, perseverance is a blessing.

I think that shedding a tear for someone you love, who has died, is a blessing. Because you have known the gift of being loved, and to love. Because you've found the strength to be weak, and to carry on.

I think that enduring a family gathering that is hard, or setting boundaries with a relationship that's hurtful is a sign of your blessedness. Because you've shown strength to care for yourself, to know your worth and insist nothing less. You are blessed when you make space to be you, and show bravery to grow and to heal.

No, I don't think that Blessedness means perfection. I think that blessedness is messy. It's complicated. But being blessed is that thread of love, of endurance, and of hope that is woven throughout every experience of your life — when even amid the hard imperfections of life, you show up and choose to be claim peace and presence.

Today we read Jesus most famous sermon, known as the Beatitudes. And many times, we hear these words as prescriptive, telling us how we are to behave and live as children of God.

Read this way, it's a sort of instruction manual for how to live. If you are meek, then you'll be rewarded. If you mourn, you should seek comfort. If you are merciful, then you will receive mercy. If we read these verses as only prescriptive, then this message is only a task list of our Christian life. It becomes a set of rules to follow to receive the reward of blessing.

And if we're honest, many of us live this way. We want the world to work this way. If I am good, good things will follow. If I behave and do things perfectly right, I will be rewarded. But even the best among us are imperfect. None of us can meet such impossibly high standards. And we know, from lived experiences, that grief and hardships will eventually find us all. *None of us, not matter how good we are, will get out of this life alive.*

And so, if Jesus is not offering us a check list for living a good Christian life... how might we understand these verses? I suggest we toss out this interesting of a prescriptive checklist for being blessed. And instead, hear Jesus offering us words of promise and hope that are descriptive.

What I mean, is that Jesus is describing to us, teaching us what being blessed looks like. He's casting a vision, drawing a picture of blessedness that not only can include all of us, but doesn't require check lists or perfection. And Jesus is doing something else, simultaneously... while he is *describing* blessing to us, he is also *actively blessing* every hearer and reader of this text.

And what you notice - is that the people receiving blessings are not those who have perfect lives. They aren't those who seem to be "lucky in life" or those who are particularly religious or good.

Instead, like so much of what Jesus teaches us, we see that the promised blessing of God, that is being poured out through Jesus very words... are given to those who seem to live lives that are not #blessed.

When we read these words as descriptive, and as ones actively happening -- we hear something new: when you mourn, you God blesses you with comfort (now!). When you hunger for justice, God blesses you with fullness. When you are poor in spirit and feel helpless or hopeless, God blesses you with the kingdom of God, right now.

Jesus *calls* you blessed -- and actively blesses you -- in the middle of your messy life, not in its perfect moments.

Some of you know this story already, but it's been on my heart this week. I'm 2014, just days before Thanksgiving, my mother in law died. She had a brutal and brief time between her diagnosis and death. And so, when thanksgiving arrives, we felt grief overwhelming any gratitude.

We had no plans for a meal, except hoping that some restaurant would be open for delivery. Instead of taking turns naming things we were grateful for, we picked out funeral clothes and searched out photos.

And then, an unexpected knock at the door. We opened it to find a cousin of my MIL whom the family had long lost touch with. He lowered the hatch of his truck to reveal several large coolers. Filled with a meal. Turkey and stuffing, potato and pie. There was enough to feed dozens, way more than the five of us could eat. Suddenly, my MIL's kitchen overflowed, looking precisely like every thanksgiving feast she had prepared.

Her presence was palpable. We sat down to eat, and we found reason to smile amid our grief. We found peace surrounding our aching hearts. And food filling our hungry stomachs.

"Blessed are you, when you grieve, for you will be comforted."
Here, in the hands of an unexpected guest we found our blessedness.

It turns out, being blessed doesn't wait for perfection. It doesn't even wait for happiness. Blessings find their way, God finds a way, right thru the mess.

This year, the anniversary of my MIL's death fell on thanksgiving. My little family gathered around our table. We used the conversation cards and prayers we revived last week here in worship. We shared memories and laughed. I made her monkey bread recipe for breakfast, and we held our grief, once again wrapped in blessings.

This time, nearly a decade later, the blessings were easier to spot, the pain a little less acute. But the joy and peace from that blessedness was strong as ever.

And so I wonder now: what is the tender place in your life? What is the grief, or the longing, or the worry you hold? What tender piece of you feels maybe a little raw or uncertain?

Here, beloveds, is the place Jesus is offering your blessings. Here, in the middle of your messy life, Jesus is bringing you hope. Because you are not alone, but are wrapped in God's tender care. You are not forgotten, but are named as a child of the Holy One. You are not broken, but are made whole by the One who gave his life for us.

You, my dear ones, are blessed.
Right now, in this moment.

These words from Jesus are not prescribing for us how we are to live, they are promises telling us who and whose we are. And by naming our mess, our brokenness and our pain, Jesus transforms them, and blesses them.

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber has written her own modern day version of this blessing, and I want to share some of it with you:

*“Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren’t sure, who can still be surprised.
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 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. Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted. Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented. 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 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.”

Can you find yourself here, beloveds?
Do you hear Jesus blessing you?

The same Jesus who cried at the death of his friend. Who turned the other cheek and forgave those who hung him on a cross... This very same Jesus blesses you. Because he was God’s Beatitude. Jesus is *“God’s blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.”*

But you, beloveds, are also God’s beatitude. You too, are not only recipients of God’s blessings, you are bearers of it to a world that is messy and hungry and broken.

You get to be the one whom shares Gods blessings with others.
How might God be nudging in you today, to unleash and release God’s blessings into our world? Who are the people in your life that need reminding of their goodness? To whom is God calling YOU to be God’s beatitude?

Maybe you’ll show up at the door of a friend with food. Or maybe you’ll sleep outside in a tent for days, raising funds for those who are homeless. Maybe you’ll offer a kind word and an extra tip to a tired waitress. Or perhaps, you’ll sit by someone who came alone to worship, or always alone at the lunch table.

You dear ones, are Gods beatitude, Gods blessing to our world. You have been nurtured and filled with hope, so that you can release and share this word of blessing with another.

God bless you as you do.

Let us pray:

Good and loving God, we know that every gift in our lives comes from you. From the beauty of your creation, to the warmth in our homes. The strength you've given us to hope, and ability to partner with you in creating your kingdom here. All of these, are signs of your blessings in our lives. Awaken us to notice them more fully, and stir in us a desire to release and share them with others. You have blessed us richly, dear God, now equip us to be your blessing in the world. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 26, 2023

Weekly Prayer

God, you are my source of life, belonging, and love. You offer me an unlimited supply of grace, hope, joy, and all that I need in my life. Thank you for your provisions, blessings, and care. May my whole life echo my gratitude and steadfast love and faith in you. In Christ I pray, Amen.

Monday, November 27

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12 NRSVUE

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Observation

In this most famous sermon, Jesus is speaking to the gathered crowds. To them, he offers God's blessing. Blessed are you when you are hopeless, when you mourn, when you're humble, and when you thirst for righteousness. Here, you will experience God.

Application

I imagine the gathered crowd was as diverse as our gathered congregation. Young and old, wealthy and poor, confident and nervous. All of them gathered with *something* upon their hearts, each of them longing to belong and to be loved. Jesus' words are powerful because he names things about us that often make us feel *separated* from love and belonging. And instead, Jesus

says: it is right in the middle of this, that God is present to you. Not when you overcome them, and not in spite of them, but *because* of your grief and hunger: right now you are a blessing. God rejoices in *you*, just as you are. And God promises to be near to you, right now. What are the longings of your heart today? How would you fill in this blank: Blessed are the _____, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for your steadfast faithfulness. Thank you for loving me fully, and for bringing healing to my heart and life. Bless me today, in all that I am, that my life might be an echo of your grace. Amen.

Tuesday, November 28

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12 CEB

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. He taught them, saying:

“Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

“Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

“Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

“Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

“Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

“Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

“Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.

“Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

“Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

Observation

Today we read the Beatitudes again, this time in the Common English Bible translation. While traditionally, we hear these verses translated as “blessed,” this translation chooses “happy.” Read the passage and notice how you hear and feel these words differently. Happy are people who are hopeless. Happy are people who make peace. Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous.

Application

Perhaps one of the most challenging parts of this passage is that Jesus calls blessed and happy those people and places in our lives that seem anything but. To be called happy while grieving or harassed seems out of reach. But Jesus promises peace upon us -- that no matter our situation, we are wrapped in God’s care. This passage is not only *prescriptive*, telling us how to live. It is *descriptive*, telling us who and whose we are right now (rather than some other time in the future). How might you choose happiness today, even amid all of life’s struggles? How might being named and claimed as God’s own bring peace to your heart?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, you are happy to call me yours, today and always. I trust in your promises and ask you to help me see myself and others as you see me. Amen.

Wednesday, November 29

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:7-9

Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. As it is written, *He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever.*

Observation

All that we are, and all that we have, comes from God. This passage invites us into relationship with God, each other, and our community. It challenges us to move from a place of scarcity to generosity, trusting in God to provide.

Application

Fresh from Thanksgiving, as we begin to turn toward Christmas, we're in a season of gratitude and giving. This passage is a good reminder that having a heart of generosity is one way we share God's love with our neighbors. They will know we are Christians by our love, indeed.

Prayer

Thank you, God, for the blessings in my life. For my friends and family, for my home and hobbies, for my church family and your created world. Help me to be generous and thankful for all you have given. Tune my heart to your grace, that my life embodies your goodness and grace. Amen.

Thursday, November 30

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:11-15

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. Your ministry of this service to God's people isn't only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God. They will give honor to God for your obedience to your confession of Christ's gospel. They will do this because this service provides evidence of your obedience, and because of your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone. They will also pray for you, and they will care deeply for you because of the outstanding grace that God has given to you. Thank God for his gift that words can't describe!

Observation

Paul is encouraging the people of Corinth to be grateful and generous, recognizing that life is more than "getting by," but that we are called to live in a way that builds up the kingdom of God. We're called to live with *open hearts*, that create spaces of belonging for all people. Paul knows that sometimes we need reminders that even small acts of generosity change lives.

Application

My Mother-in-law died just a couple days before Thanksgiving in 2014. That year, Thanksgiving felt less about giving thanks and more about surviving our grief. But then, a distant cousin knocked on our door, unannounced. With him was an entire Thanksgiving feast: turkey and stuffing, potatoes and pies. Even though it had been years since they had spent time together, he delivered this meal to his family. The real gift, of course, was the delivery of hope and love. His generosity changed the course of our grief. Instead of feeling alone, we felt blessed. Just as

Jesus promised in Matthew 5: “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*” Our blessing, our comfort, came to us because of another’s generosity.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for daily opportunities to be generous and thankful. Make me aware of the people and places you call me to serve and keep my heart open to loving as you love. And thank you for the people who have shown your generosity and love to me. Amen.

Friday, December 1

Scripture: Colossians 3:15-17

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Observation

What do you think of when you hear the word *rule*? What about *rich*? Contrary to examples of power and riches in our world, God invites us to be powerful in peaceful community. To be rich in God’s word, covered by God’s wisdom. This passage reminds us that worship is a way of life, not an hour of our week. We belong first to God, and all that we are, everything that we do, is to be in response to our belonging.

Application

I love this passage, and it is one that brings immediate comfort. It encourages me to slow down, to rest in God, and to notice my surroundings. While much of life encourages us to “go, go, go” - these words invite me into another way. How might this season be different if we grounded ourselves first in Christ’s peace? In God’s wisdom through scripture? Might we be more patient while waiting in line? Or less frazzled at the end of a long day? How might our living be an act of worship?

Prayer

Dearest Jesus, as the hymnist wrote: *then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee. How great thou art.* Thank you for your outpouring of gifts in my life, and the ways you wrap me in your peace and presence. Keep me focused on you today, that my life be made rich by your grace. Amen.

Saturday, December 2

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Observation

This is from the closing chapter of the letter to Philippians, and it includes closing remarks and blessings for their days. Much of this closing chapter includes reminders to be joyful and mindful of God’s ongoing presence in our lives. We have been blessed by God in many ways and have daily access to God who upholds and encourages us.

Application

Like the Beatitudes which began our week, these verses encourage us to be joyful in all things. Rejoice always. Don't wait to rejoice until everything is perfect. Don't wait to go before God until you've got it all figured out. Instead: rejoice now. Pray now. Praise now. And trust that God is with you in midst of it all. As the Psalmist promises us, in Psalm 139: *"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, your right hand shall hold me fast."*

Prayer

Good and loving God, you are with me always and everywhere. As we prepare to enter the Advent season, keep me mindful of your ongoing promise to be Emmanuel, which means "God with us." Give me confidence to turn to you in prayer, to be generous with my words and actions, to be joyful in my living. Make all that I am, and everything I do, an act of worship and gratitude to you. Amen.