

Pastor's Message - Ash Wednesday, 2021
Sermon on the Mount: Blessed Are You

Blessings can come cheap and without any thought. You can sneeze anywhere there are at least 2 or 3 people and receive two or three blessings on the spot (and a few unfriendly or suspicious looks as well). "Bless you!" they say. Have you ever wondered at the origin of that practice? One that I have heard is that a sneeze expels demons from within the person and a "God bless" prevents the devil from reinhabiting. Another is as a preventive against disease or illness. Those with a cold or allergies get blest many times over. Blessing the sneezer is part of our cultural heritage. But beyond this, and beyond religious conversation, we don't hear the word "blessed" very often.

However, in the Bible, God is blessing people all over the place. God's very first blessing came on the fifth day of creation. After creating birds and fish, Genesis tells us that "God blest them" (Gen 1:22) with the promise that they would multiply. Later God blest Abraham and sent him packing and then blest him again and again. Way at the other end of the Bible in Revelation, there are no less than seven blessings from God scattered throughout the book.

Here's your Greek lesson for the day. The word the original New Testament uses for "blessed" is "makarios." At the front end of that word, you can hear "mak" as in "macro," meaning to make large or long. It's the word Jesus used in his famous Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. To bless someone is to extend or make greater that which one has by giving it to another. You might think of the concept of "paying it forward." Giving to others as you have been given.

Jesus' beatitudes are not wishes though. He isn't saying, "I wish that you might be poor in spirit" or "I wish that you would hunger and thirst after righteousness." These are descriptions of his disciples as they will live and witness in the kingdom. More than that, the Beatitudes are exclamations, even celebrations, of those who will follow Jesus. It's as if Jesus is saying, "How blessed are the meek!" or "How blessed are the peacemakers!" Given how early the sermon comes in Jesus' ministry and the slowness of the disciples to grasp the kingdom, one can only admire Jesus' confidence that the kingdom would take hold in people's lives.

On this Ash Wednesday, three of Jesus' blessings stand out for us. The first is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We come this day "poor in spirit." That is, we come with nothing to offer God but our sins and our needs. We come just as we are "without one plea." Found in Martin Luther's pocket shortly before he died was a scrap of paper with several scribbles in his own handwriting. Among the notes to self was this one "This is true. We are all beggars" (James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986, 2003], 297). To us cross-marked sinners, this very day comes the kingdom with all the grace and forgiveness we need to be blessed.

Only Jesus can give this blessing because only Jesus ushered in the kingdom of heaven by emptying himself and taking the form of a suffering servant in our place.

He earned this blessing for us by becoming “poor in spirit” in our place. His humility took him all the way to the cross. There he “preached” his greater sermon on the mount: on Mount Calvary.

Another blessing which is especially ours today comes with Jesus’ second beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” We are blessed today to have a “godly grief” over our sin (2 Cor 7:10). You may recall a few times in your life when you deeply disappointed your parents or a friend or a loved one. No doubt, you can remember the look on their faces or even what they said. The sadness you felt inside which may linger for a long, long time can be very profound. Some people never get over that sadness. The same is true many times over in our relationship with our heavenly Father. Sin is not objective or neutral. It is deeply relational. When we sin, we deeply disappoint a loving Father, and it leaves us sad. It’s this godly grief combined with our faith which brings us to repentance. In sorrow, we turn from our sin to face the cross of Jesus Christ, and we are forgiven.

Here again only Jesus can give the comfort we need. We have the comfort of our Father’s forgiveness because Jesus bought our forgiveness with his own life. This Son did not disappoint his Father. He took our sins on himself and died for us. That is why Jesus is the only one who can comfort us in our godly grief over sin.

And a third blessing comes to us this Ash Wednesday when Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” It’s worth noting that this blessing clearly flows from the previous ones. It’s not enough to be humble and repentant or meek, for that matter, which is the third beatitude. This would leave us alone with God. This fourth beatitude reminds us that we have a life to live and people with whom we live it. So, our hunger and thirst for righteousness reveal in us a deep desire to be right with God and right with others.

In the best-selling book (2008) and film (2017), *Same Kind of Different as Me*, a once homeless writer/philosopher named Denver Moore says, “There’s something I learned when I was homeless: Our limitation is God’s opportunity. When you get all the way to the end of your rope and there ain’t nothin’ you can do, that’s when God takes over.” So it is with a yearning for righteousness. We will always reach the end of our rope.

The righteousness we seek is a righteousness only God can give, and it does not come cheap. It cost the life of Jesus on the cross. This is a righteousness of the heart which we receive through faith in him. His perfect righteousness becomes ours as we place our trust in him. From His righteousness flows all of our right decisions, right relationships, and right actions. And we are satisfied ... and blest in Christ.

As we begin our Lenten journey, as we make our way through life, Christians will look different from the rest of humanity. Our Christ-like humility, our godly grief, and our righteousness of faith mark us as unique. As we recognize Christ’s blessings to us, we have the opportunity, privilege, and joy to bless others in the same way. Amen.

Based on a sermon by Dean Nadasdy.

© 2019 Creative Communications for the Parish. All rights reserved.