

“Finding God in Unexpected Blessings”

Matthew 5: 1-12

I think what I should have said is that this Sunday we were going to take a look at “Finding God in Unusual Blessings, not Unexpected Blessings as it is printed in the bulletin today because that is exactly what our text is about-unusual blessings. Usually when we talk about being blessed, or when we talk about the blessings in our lives, we tend to think about the positive stuff-you know, good job, family, friends, food in our pantries, clothes on our back, overall, things that help us have a feeling that life is going pretty well for us. That’s what we think about when we begin to talk about the blessings in our lives and yes, they can be unexpected. Because, let’s be honest, more often than not, we take them for granted. We take them for granted until something happens and they disappear. Sometimes that’s the only time we really begin to appreciate them as blessings in our lives.

Or sometimes we say that these things are unexpected blessings because they are not the “usual” way the world blesses. They are not the “usual” blessings that the world defines as blessings. We know that the world usually defines blessings as money, fame, power, success, or reaching the top of the ladder so we can look down on the other people. That’s what the world thinks about when it

begins to talk about blessings. And we have all heard sermon upon sermon about how we as people of faith are blessed by God in other ways, unexpected ways, the ways of God's Kingdom, that I'm sure everyone was expecting to hear that again today. And I'll be honest, that's how I thought this sermon was going to go when I started out at the beginning of the week.

But I kept coming back to this particular version of the Beatitudes and like a piece of popcorn stuck between the teeth, it annoyed me all week. I couldn't let it go. It kept rubbing me the wrong way all week and no matter what I did, I couldn't come to terms with it until I realized that the Spirit of God was leading me in a different direction, was challenging me to bring a different message. I couldn't come to terms with my annoyance and frustration until I realized that the Spirit of God was pushing me to really struggle with what it means to be blessed by God.

I invite you to turn in your pew bibles to Matthew 5, verses 1 -12.

Read Text

I could tell by the number of responses to this week's Theology Tuesday that it struck a nerve with many of you as well. There was such a wide range of responses to the question: "What does it mean to be blessed?" Responses such as "Blessed are those that live their lives to the fullest. They have happy hearts and do their works with positive energy. They find joy in all those around them, young or old, and revel with new ideas and give credence to all thoughts. To be blessed is

to find the good in all things, to be able to have the faith that all things are in His hands and to be able to accept those things we cannot change”. Responses such as “I think as Christians we are all blessed to know that God has prepared a beautiful place for us when we die. But here on earth, I think most people see blessings as only the good things in our lives. But the bad things that happen are blessings too. We may not always see the blessing at the time. God is always working in our lives and if we take the time we will discover how blessed we are even when things are bad”. As well as responses such as “I think we as Americans are so blessed that we have no idea what it means to be blessed. We pay little to no attention to the happenings in the rest of the world. We don't work to make things better. I spent 2 hours in the mall yesterday and bought nothing. I couldn't help but think how useless almost all of it was. Conspicuous flash without substance. A waste of the earth's resources.”

All such great responses that I was tempted to email everyone back and say, “You’re preaching today!”

But I realized that I had been given an unexpected blessing, an unusual blessing through your responses. I realized that all these great responses helped me clarify God’s message today about what it means to be blessed. All these great responses reminded me that struggling with what it means to be blessed by God is exactly what Jesus was calling his disciples to do in our text today. All these great

responses helped me realize that the blessings of God really do come in unusual and unexpected ways, sometimes in very jarring and annoying ways, because they push us to let go of our self centeredness and open ourselves up to the selflessness of the Kingdom of God. And they do this by putting us at the feet of Jesus, stripping away all of our pretenses, stripping away all the things that distract us so that we can truly listen and focus on what Jesus is calling us to do as his disciples here on earth.

This part, the Beatitudes, are a part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his BIG preaching and teaching moment in the Gospel of Matthew, the moment when he lays out what it means to be a disciple, when he lays out what to look for and how to live out the principles of the Kingdom of God here on earth. And we have to realize that although there was a crowd following Jesus, surrounding him, at this point, Jesus is talking to his disciples and he is giving them the keys to the Kingdom. And he does it by sharing some unusual and unexpected blessings.

Jesus starts out with a familiar formula—"Blessed be". The disciples had heard things like this before, especially when they read the Psalms and Proverbs. They knew what was coming—good news! Rewards! Happiness! They just knew that Jesus was going to tell them what they had to do, step by step, to receive God's blessings. They just knew that Jesus was going to tell them who they needed

to turn into, who they needed to model themselves after in order to find favor with God.

And we can almost see the surprise on their faces when Jesus changes the formula. Jesus doesn't tell them what they have to do. Jesus doesn't tell them who they need to model themselves after in order to receive the keys to the Kingdom. Instead he begins to start talking about the poor in spirit. Instead Jesus begins to start talking about the meek. Instead, he begins to start talking about the peacemakers.

Now, at this point, on that mountaintop, we can almost see the disciples' eyebrows rise in surprise. We can almost see their foreheads crinkle up in puzzlement. especially when Jesus tells them that they are blessed when they come to the end of their rope, tells them that they are blessed when they lose what is most dear to them, tells them that they are blessed when they are persecuted. We can almost see them begin to whisper to each other, begin to ask each other, "Shouldn't someone tell Jesus that these blessings are sort of odd? Shouldn't someone tell Jesus that that's not how this whole being his disciple is supposed to work?"

We can almost see how uncomfortable the disciples are in this conversation with Jesus because, let's be honest, we are feeling the exact same way. When we hear these blessings, these Beatitudes, all we really want to say is, "Jesus, blessings

are supposed to make us feel better, blessings are supposed to be rewards for our good behavior. Jesus, you are not really helping us out with these blessings that you are giving to us. We are right there with the disciples, shifting in our seats. We are right there with the disciples as they give into the urge to nudge Peter, encouraging him to step up and have him explain just exactly how this formula of blessing is supposed to work.

But Jesus keeps on teaching before Peter and the rest of us can do such a thing. Jesus keeps on blessing them and us as modern day disciples with let's be honest-blessings we don't really want because what good are they really? None of these blessings help us get ahead. None of these blessings are worth anything according to this world's standards. None of these blessings really inspire us to be Jesus' disciples here on earth.

And that's when we realize something. Through these blessings, we have been given a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Sure, these blessings are not really good for this world but they are great for us as disciples. They are great for us because each and every one of them reminds us that the blessings of God can only occur when we give up our preoccupation with ourselves and our own selfish needs and begin to focus on the Kingdom of God. What Jesus is trying to get the disciples and us to realize is that the Kingdom of God is not about individuals. He is trying to get all of us to realize that he is not here on earth to give us as

individuals wise counsel or assist us with coping through life. Jesus wasn't sent here for the people of God to be the new self help guru.

Jesus came to show that the grace of the Kingdom of God does and can infiltrate our present time. Jesus came to show all of God's people that a life worth living is a life based on knowing the blessings and the presence of God each and every day in our lives. Jesus came to show us that the Kingdom of God does not revolve around us as individuals and our own personal issues. No, Jesus came to show that The Kingdom of God is about building up the Body of Christ here on earth through God's grace, through God's peace, through God's love.

And the only way that can happen is for us to reorient ourselves away from the preoccupation of self, towards a larger, more inclusive concern for the wider community. Experiencing God's blessings through the Kingdom of God can only happen when we let go of our own selfish wants, our own selfish desires. It can only happen when we give up our concern for me, myself and I and remove the blinders that block out so much of the world that doesn't concern or involve us. Once we reorient ourselves towards God's grace and God's love, we can truly begin to experience the unusual blessings of God here on earth, the blessings of God's grace, the blessings of God's love, the blessings of God's peace.

The thing we have to realize is that Christianity is not another philosophy of life. Christianity is not designed to make people successful. Christianity is not a

scheme to reduce stress, to lose weight, to advance one's career, or preserve one from illness.

What Christianity is, what we are called to as disciples of Christ here on earth, is a way of living, a way of living that invites us to let go and let God in, a way of living that is based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that peace will finally prevail and that God's future will be a time of mercy and justice, a way of living that beckons us to let go of our identity as individuals who don't need anybody and embrace the community of God's Kingdom in our lives and in our hearts.

That's the true blessing of God. When we embrace Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are being given a gift, a gift that tells us that we are no longer alone, we are no longer individuals but a part of the Body of Christ. We are given a gift that shakes us out of life-draining worries and fears about me, myself and I, and given a gift that shows us true joy, that shows us true delight, that shows us God's new life through a community of love and grace.

What Jesus is telling his disciples is that he didn't come here on earth to make them feel better about themselves. He came to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's creation. And he did this by not meeting their expectations. He did this by not fulfilling their own wants and desires. He did this by giving up his own life for all the children of God.

You see, The keys to the Kingdom, God's unusual blessings are simple. The Kingdom of God is not about building us up so that we feel better about ourselves. It is not about coping with life's ups and downs. It is not about looking in the mirror and saying "we are somebody special."

No, the Kingdom of God is an invitation to reorient ourselves towards God's grace, towards God's love, towards God's peace. The Kingdom of God is not a blessing because of what we can gain through it. The Kingdom of God is a blessing because it strips us down. It breaks through our constant "What about me attitude" and centers us on the love and grace of God. The Kingdom of God is a blessing because it breaks down the walls that separate us as individuals and binds us together as the people of God.

I don't know about you- but I get so annoyed with this world's Me, Me, Me train of thought. And I'll be honest, I know that I get annoying when I start the same way myself. And sometimes, I need someone to say, It's not about you. Sometimes, I need someone to say-Shut up! Sometimes, I need someone to remind me that I need to let go of my own selfish wants and desires and let God in so God can do God's thing once in a while, which is to build us up as the Body of Christ here on earth.

And that is exactly what Jesus does in these Beatitudes. He reminds the disciples, and he reminds us as modern day disciples of Christ, that the Kingdom

of God is not all about us. He reminds us that the blessings of God are not exclusively ours. Jesus came to turn our world upside down and he did this by giving his life for us so that we might live. And he is calling us to do the same. He is inviting us to give up our lives based on “me, me, me” and discover the wonderful blessings of community through “us, us, us.”

When we allow God in, when we allow God to turn our lives around, to turn our lives upside down, when we allow God to reorient our lives from me, me, me to us, us, us, we find true joy. We experience the true blessings of God. And only then we can truly begin to understand what it means to be blessed by God. The Kingdom of God is not about making us feel better about ourselves nor is it about coping with life. The Kingdom of God is about making us stronger as a community of God’s people through God’s love, through God’s grace, through God’s peace. The Kingdom of God is about the unusual ways that God shakes us out of our own little worlds and binds us together as the Body of Christ here on earth.

May we always be open to the unexpected and the unusual ways that God shakes us out of our own little worlds and reminds us that it is not about me, the unexpected and unusual ways that God reminds us about the true blessings of the Kingdom of God. Amen.

