

SERMON: Blessed to be a Blessing

TEXT: Matthew 5:1-12

When my sister, Emily, was planning her wedding back in 1998, she asked me if I would officiate. Of course, I was thrilled to do so. For my part in the planning, I asked what scripture she would like me to use as the basis for my message. She hesitated, then admitted that she wasn't sure she wanted any readings from the Bible. It's not that she doesn't believe in God. She was raised in the church and very active as I was, especially in her high school years. In fact, she also considered becoming a minister at one point.

But Emily was also a classic middle child, and has always been a radical thinker. When she's passionate about something, she makes it her mission and gives it 100%. For example, in her efforts to save the environment, she insisted that any family gatherings should use real dishes instead of paper plates and plastic utensils. We all went along with her - mostly because she offered to wash all the dishes. But her frequent *preaching* to the rest of the family about social justice issues at times got rather annoying and tiresome.

This way of thinking colored her beliefs about the Bible to the point where she thought such ancient and patriarchal words couldn't possibly apply to her enlightened ideas about marriage as an equal partnership.

However, I insisted that my calling as a Christian minister meant that I would perform a Christian wedding with Christian scriptures. Truth be told, my insistence *may have been* tinged by our fierce and on-going sibling rivalry. Nevertheless, she relented and chose the Beatitudes as the basis for my message. So there!

It's certainly not your typical wedding scripture, and at first I wasn't sure how to make it fit the occasion. But it turns out that what Jesus was preaching in this portion of his Sermon on the Mount was pretty radical and unconventional for its time. Which made it something my sister could get on board with.

Jesus was radical. He was passionate about social justice. He preached against corrupt political systems that served the rich and oppressed the poor. He lifted up the lowly, shared meals with sinners, and angered those who were

privileged and self-righteous. He took common beliefs and ideals and turned them upside down.

You see, people believed that *blessings* were rewards from God for right living, obedience, and faithfulness. If you were healthy and wealthy and wise, it was because God was smiling on you, because God approved of you. For every A on your report card, God would bless you. By the same token, if you were stricken with illness or disease, if you were poor and had to beg for food, if your spouse or your child died, if anything bad happened to you it was because God was frowning on you, because God disapproved of your behavior. Any hardship was considered a punishment from God.

Then Jesus came along. The crowd was large, so he went up on a mountain and sat down to teach, just as the rabbis did in the temple. What he taught would be different than anything they'd heard before. What he taught would not confirm their long-held beliefs, but would challenge them instead.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” he taught. “Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek.” The interesting thing - the very thing that perhaps makes us

sit up and pay attention - is that it sounds so backwards. We don't feel very blessed when we are poor in spirit; nor when we are just plain poor. We don't feel very blessed - and certainly not "happy" as some translations say - when we are in mourning or when we are meek or when we are persecuted. But the very fact that Jesus pronounces it makes it true. When Jesus looks out over the crowd and says, "Blessed are you," at that moment they were blessed. The moment we meet Jesus, we are blessed. Sort of like when God the Creator said, "Let there be light," and there was light. The blessing is that Jesus sees us and acknowledges our pain and our struggle, and accepts us, and chooses to be in relationship with us.

According to one commentary, "the beatitudes are expressions of what is already true about the Christian community.... Among every authentic Christian congregation can be found persons of meekness, ministers of mercy, and workers for peace. Their presence and activity among us is a sign of God's blessing and a call to all of us to conform our common life more and more to these kingdom values." (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, Matthew, Mark)

Jesus blesses us now, and reinforces it with a word of hope for the future. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Let's not be fooled,

however. The meek will never inherit the earth in a worldly sense, but only when God's kingdom comes.

Quoting that same commentary: "Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one's career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God's future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty. So, blessed are those who live this life now - [who live these kingdom values now] - even when such a life seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God." (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, Matthew, Mark)

This reminds me of the amazing spirituals sung by African Americans who were suffering the evils of slavery. The hymn, *We Shall Overcome*, (#379 in the Glory to God hymnal) which is primarily associated with the Civil Rights Movement most likely dates from the days of the slave trade. It might have even been a work song aboard slave ships.

(soloist, verse 1 from the balcony)

Their strong faith taught them that they were blessed already, which allowed them to hold onto hope that they would overcome their trials and be liberated, someday.

Think about this. When life is good, when everything is going well, you're healthy and successful and respected and loved, I think our tendency is to pat ourselves on the back. "Yay, me! Look how good I am!" And we begin to strut around with our noses in the air. Rather than moving closer to God in gratitude, we move further away with the idea that we have no need for God.

Our job as the church is to demonstrate God's kingdom before it comes. Our job is to bless others as Jesus blesses us - with hope. Especially those who do not feel blessed: the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the peacemakers, the persecuted.

Finally, a story I've probably shared before, but one of my favorites. When my son was learning the Lord's Prayer, he got some of the words wrong, as any four-year-old would. His mistake made a beautiful sermon all by itself, as he prayed, "Thy Kingdom come, then I will be done."

We are blessed, despite our status or station in life. We are blessed - not in power or privilege or wealth - but in meekness, in mercy, in our hunger and thirst for righteousness, and as we work for peace. We are blessed at this table, as we share the simple elements of bread and cup. We are blessed by the body and blood of Jesus. May we bless others as he has blessed us. With hope.

To the glory of God!

AMEN.