

## Message: "The Nature of True Blessing"

### Scripture Lesson: Matthew 5:1-12

5When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I've been unexpectedly blessed recently - how about you?

I've been blessed by a profoundly malfunctioning sewer, a flat tire in the middle of nowhere, a colleague of mine sharing something I strongly disagree with, and having to tear out a part of my home's bathroom renovation (it took me two months to put this in; it's taken me just a few days to tear it out).

Those don't sound much like blessings, do they?

I'm not alone; in the past few weeks, I've had people reflect how they recognized blessing as they faced a loved one's death; I had a person mention their blessing as they lost their job; I've heard blessing associated with pastors in the middle of deeply conflicted congregations, and, dare I say it, I've heard blessing associated with this cold spell that we are presently experiencing.

These also don't sound much like blessings, do they?

Neither do the things lifted up in today's scripture passage. Blessed are they who mourn, those who suffer, those who are poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are reviled and persecuted for my sake.....that's quite a list of what could be called anti-blessings, opposite to what we most commonly think of as conditions of favor.

To be sure, there are some blessings in the beatitudes we can easily agree with - blessed are the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers .....now, that's more like it! We can probably see ourselves pursuing such status in our everyday faith, taking on a spiritual demeanor that benefits others and

gives us composure as we are gracious towards others and gracious towards ourselves.

But not all that is blessed is so comforting, at least to Jesus. Much that is blessed is tough as nails, involving the harder side of things, from sacrifice to pain to poverty to even death. Not all blessings produce happiness.

So what is going on in the Sermon on the Mount? What does Jesus mean by this blessing that seems counter to common sense? What do we mean when we experience and express blessings in the midst of pain and brokenness?

Are we all crazy? Or are we somehow being invited to live in a deeper way?

I said earlier that I've been blessed by our church's sewer problem, a flat tire, a disagreeable colleague, and our bathroom's renovation problems. And I am serious -- have been blessed in these situations. I have been blessed by learning about the real problems of our sewer system that have been somewhat undiagnosed for decades but now may finally have a solution. I was blessed by a flat tire that made me realize one of our tires was basically a racing slick with no tread left, needing complete replacement, avoiding a guaranteed blowout soon (and, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, I find it very comforting to know that I can still change a tire in under ten minutes! Well, maybe 15?). I was blessed by the colleague of mine who helped me see a very different point of view on something I had assumed was common sense; such assumptions always benefit from critical scrutiny. And I have been blessed by tearing out the part of our bathroom renovation that wasn't quite right, and discovering my, shall we say, "custom style" would have probably produced a very leaky tub and shower! I would not call any of these experiences happy, or especially enjoyable, or even pleasant; they embodied challenges and frustrations and tensions I'd rather not have faced. But they did bring into my life assets for living, learnings and growth and patience and insights that are only gained through the harder worn paths. They were blessings in the far more important sense of the word - blessings in terms of what serves life best.

I don't do this often, but sometimes it is helpful to consult a dictionary to see what an original meaning of a word was. From dictionary.com, the word "blessing" is defined as "a **special favor, mercy, or benefit**: a favor or gift bestowed by God, the invoking of God's favor upon a person, thereby bringing happiness."

But here is the question: are all special favors, mercies, benefits, or gifts enjoyable? Especially where God is concerned? Or let me put the question bluntly: Are the valuable things in life always happy things? Are the most valuable things in life the happy things?

I think often of this when I am in casual conversation with people who don't know me very well. We speak about the weather, the news, perhaps good restaurants we frequent or the places we have been. Often the conversation rounds about to the question of what we do for a living, whereupon I let them know I am a pastor. After their eyes have stopped popping out in surprise or uncertainty (that was the subject of another sermon!), they gain their composure enough to ask a predictable question "Do you enjoy being a pastor?" I sometimes catch them by surprise when I respond, "I wouldn't use the word "enjoy." I don't enjoy being in the room when someone is passing away. I don't enjoy working with a couple deep in conflict heading for divorce. I don't enjoy speaking truth to power as our advocacy group is presently doing with our state's legislature full of bills that will harm many. I don't enjoy responding to an email hot to the touch filled with unjustifiable rage over something I simply didn't do (yes, I have received a few of those!).

But I am constantly finding blessings in my work because I have not limited the understanding of blessing to happiness. I find meaning as I attend the deathbed; I find value as I moderate a tense conversation; I find balance when I pay attention to those who are of opposite thinking to mine; I discover I have a part to play in the struggle of others if I let them into my life, and if they let me into theirs; I learn that my role as a pastor can help bring positives into negatives, can help persons be open to hope in the middle of despair, and can provide a space where the traumatic can be tuned towards our need for God in our lives. What a humbling honor it is to share the journey God has given to us, a journey that was never meant to be taken alone.

I think we get closer to the real nature of blessings when we move away from happiness and bliss and towards meaning and substance, which are not always comfortable, and which are often challenging and burdensome. But their contribution to life is greater, their need in the world is more profound; I think this is what Jesus is getting at when he turns the tables on our sense of what it

means to be blessed. It is not always happiness that results; it is more often the deepening of life in ways the world cannot, or will not, encourage.

I came across a prayer by Rev. William Sloane Coffin which offers words of both challenge and blessing consistent with the understanding Jesus shares in our passage; I'd like to leave you with this prayer today (let us pray): "Because we love the world, we pray now, O [God], for grace to quarrel with it, O Thou whose lover's quarrel with the world is the history of the world . . . Lord, grant us grace to quarrel with the worship of success and power . . . to quarrel with all that profanes and trivializes [people] and separates them . . . number us, we beseech Thee, in the ranks of those who went forth from this place longing only for those things for which Thou dost make us long, [those] for whom the complexity of the issues only served to renew their zeal to deal with them, [those] who alleviated pain by sharing it; and [those] who were always willing to risk something big for something good . . . O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them. [take our lives and live through them, that we may work your blessing in the world]"