

Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are...

You would think that as a Christian and a minister I would be excited when someone tells me how blessed they are. Yet so often I hear blessing as being associated with abundance of material goods. Not that it is wrong to feel blessed when able to afford many of life's wonderful opportunities and things. Maybe the challenge lies in the fact that we see those who have little to nothing, whether stuff or opportunities, as not having God's blessing on their lives. Many who talk of being blessed do not have any connection between that and a life of faithful living...of being Christian.

#(Hashtag)blessed has become so popular on the social media platform twitter that a new Christmas movie came out last November titled *Hashtag Blessed: The Movie*. So, the thought of blessing and what that means certainly goes beyond the scope of what we find in the Bible. This particular movie's story line is about a woman who is busy comparing herself to others who seem to have it all, and learns how to be thankful, as properly a movie in the Christmas spirit is to do – well at least in the minds of viewers that this movie is aimed at.

Much of my own cynicism comes from being tentative about those who preach from the lens of the prosperity gospel. Meaning that you are blessed when you are blessed with an abundance that allows you to buy what you want, live comfortably, and seemingly judge those who can't make ends meet. It is sort of like, wondering what kind of punishment God is giving those who have not lived their lives making good choices or who haven't managed to succeed in their work, making a good wage, again in order to have purchasing power, or influence. Often prosperity, seen as blessing, looks down on others. Prosperity linked with blessing sees power and prestige as having God's favour.

Admittedly, how many of us hasn't questioned what someone has done to deserve being so unlucky, or to find themselves in a downtrodden and lowly position, whether in their families or society. If we are honest with ourselves, and paying attention, those kinds of thoughts cross through our minds more often than we may want to admit. We begin to think that people deserve what they get. But is that the way Jesus taught us to understand blessing?

It is here that we turn to what is commonly known as The Beatitudes. Not only are these some of the most well-known verses of scripture, they are also widely written about. There are a whole host of books written as a study of this text. We like the *blessed are...* words, but when we take a look at who is blessed it seems to go against what culturally we think of as blessing.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek or humble. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Thinking that we are blessed when things are not going well is upside-down. How can one be blessed when things are bad? Yet, the first four of these statements of Jesus are about blessing in our time of need.

The next four statements are about how we share what we have. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Not that sharing what and who we are in these contexts call for living in a way that is not necessarily comfortable or safe. Still it is being willing to allow ourselves to be in places, or maybe times, of vulnerability whether physically or emotionally.

The last statement of the beatitudes, verse 11, specifically talks about the trouble we may find ourselves in because we try to live out our faith in Christ in ways that are not accepted by others. It may be because our living, as is asked of us in the beatitudes, can put us at odds with the values of the world. The beatitudes illustrate God's favour for those who are not powerful, those who are vulnerable and in need of help and of God. You see the more we have, the more opportunities or material wealth, the less we tend to think we need God.

But if it is the case, that those who are vulnerable are have God's favour, where is the blessing for us?

It may be helpful to understand that these words come after Jesus has spent time in the wilderness, dealing with worldly temptations, he has begun his ministry of calling people to abundant living through repentance. Think of this repentance as a turning toward Jesus, toward God, and toward the work of the Holy Spirit in your life and in the world.

This is not so much about sin, though it certainly is part of recognizing sin in our lives, who we are and how we fall short, but it is also and maybe more so, about how we live in the knowledge that there is a God that loves us and not only us, but all people. People who are from a different country or culture. People who are of a different gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, colour or faith tradition.

At this point in the story, Jesus has called the first disciples and begins to teach them and in turn those in the crowd listening in on the conversation. The words of the Beatitudes are important because these statements introduce us to the central themes in the Gospel of Matthew. These words tell us what the kingdom of heaven is all about...what the kingdom of heaven looks like. These words tell us what are the signs of the kingdom of heaven and what it means about how we live in the world. How, as Christians we move and live and have our being in the world, then and now, takes on a whole other understanding of what abundance looks like, who is favoured, who is loved, than what one might realize.

Chapter 4 of Matthew, the words of which come just before The Beatitudes, is about how Jesus started his ministry. Particularly verse 23 says, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

Jesus’ priorities were teaching, preaching and healing. He was with the people in need. Even in this moment, Jesus was among people who were facing the struggle of living under Roman occupation. Their lives were not lives of material abundance or power. These are people who are poor in spirit, who mourn, not just those who have died that they love, but mourn their loss of home and country. These are people who are meek, they have no power. These are people who hunger and thirst for real food and drink.

In this they are told that God sees them, knows their struggle, pain, and loss and is with them. Not only that, but they are called to see that in others, knowing that regardless of their circumstance they do have something to offer. They can offer caring and compassion. They can bring words of comfort and challenge into their sphere of influence that can bring about change for others. There is also the acknowledgement that to do so is not easy.

But doing all of this, living in the recognition of God’s grace and love, allows us to live into that in our own lives, being a witness to others of God’s grace and love, and in turn impacting the world.

This can be especially true when we are people gathered together as a community of grace and compassion. A community that seeks the well-being of others, welcoming them into our midst, but also going out to bring grace and compassion, as well as speaking and acting for justice for those who are most vulnerable. This is what the church is called to be.

In my own experience, each of the churches I am working with are going through a time of transition. The stories are different as are the people. The Beatitudes formed the core of Jesus ministry. What would transpire in our congregations is those statements became core...central to our understanding of how God is asking us to be the church in the world, on whatever street we are planted? How would that change what we focused on, how we spent our money?

Looking to Jesus’ example of teaching, preaching, and healing, restoring people to wholeness, is important as we listen for and observe what is emerging among who we are as God’s people in this moment in the history of our congregation. God is still present and at work in the world. There is opportunity for us to join that activity.

May all that we do in the coming days, weeks, and months lead us to living out our faith in ways that help others experience the presence of God intellectually and in their bodies, the physical bodies, with real needs. May they come to know God in their lives through us, and in so doing may our own faith be strengthened, renewed, and our

relationship with God, with ourselves, and with others be brought to wholeness. Blessed are...Blessed are the people of God who reach out in love, grace, and compassion.

In Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and the love of God. Amen.