

Blessed

January 24, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 4:23 - 5:12

I have a quick question for each one of you: What thoughts or images does the word “blessing” bring up for you? What does the word “blessing” mean to you?

We may think of a blessing as being a prayer before a meal. “Pastor Melissa, will you bless our food?” Or “will you say the blessing?”

In Jewish tradition, a “blessing” is any prayer, said at any time – usually a prayer of thanksgiving, or a prayer of gratitude. “*Baruch attah Adonai elohenu Melech ha-olam...*” – “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe...” – usually followed by something specific for which they are grateful – for the food we eat; for the wine we drink; for the first breath that we breathe in the morning; for all the “stuff” of life. Blessed are you, O God. Holy are you. Amazing and magnificent are you, for you have taken it upon yourself to care for us. Thank you.

A blessing might serve as words of farewell – words of grace – almost a benediction, of sorts. A kind of prayer for somebody or a group of somebodies, while we are apart. The traditional Irish blessing is an example: “May the road rise to meet you, the wind be always at your back...”, or the Aaronic blessing found in Numbers chapter 6: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you...”, or the Mizpah blessing in Genesis 31: “May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from the other.”

Sometimes we use the word “blessing” as a sort of permission – permission with love and care. As in, the old tradition of a man asking his girlfriend’s father for his “blessing” before he proposes.

And there are also other ways we might use the word “blessing.” When we talk about ourselves as having been “blessed,” we often mean that in material ways. “God has blessed me, and now I want to bless you” is sometimes the way we preface it when we are giving a generous gift to somebody. “What a blessing,” we might say when a new baby is born, or when we receive something we have been longing for, or when something unexpectedly good happens to us.

In the Old Testament, a “blessing” was sort-of akin to a will – a way that one generation would pass down something of themselves to the next generation, most commonly an inheritance from a father to his eldest son – a way of conferring the family legacy down through the ages. If we remember the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis, Jacob was

absolutely obsessed with blessings. When someone blessed you, good things happened. Jacob wanted his father's blessing so badly that he deceived his father to steal the blessing that belonged to his older brother. And then later, he wrestled a stranger all night long, even through a dislocated hip, for the chance that that stranger would then "bless" him. Bring good things upon him.

We might say that somebody is "blessed" with good looks, or with above-average intelligence, or with kindness, or with leadership skills, or with another positive character trait that sets them apart.

And then, on the flip side, if you've ever lived or travelled to the South, you will know that one of the most biting comments that a nice, southern woman will make is "well, bless her heart." Basically, "I don't want to say anything mean, so I am just going to say this superficially nice thing instead, but everybody around me knows what I mean and what I really want to say."

In the Greek, there are a couple of different words that translate to "blessed" or "blessing." The first word is the word "*eulogeo*," and this word is probably the kind of blessing that we think of most often when we think of blessings. It comes from the prefix "*eu*," meaning "good" or "well," and the root "*lego*," to speak or to say. So literally, it means "to speak well of," or "to speak good things into," or even, "to praise." So when we say that we "bless the Lord," we are "speaking well of the Lord," or "praising the Lord," and when God "blesses us," God is speaking goodness – speaking good things into – us. When we are told to "bless those who persecute us," we are being told to speak well even of those who do not speak well of us. To find something nice to say, even when it is hard. When Jesus "blessed" the little children, he welcomed them. He spoke well of them. He advocated for them.

But then there is a second word for "blessed," and this is the word that we find used in the Beatitudes – our scripture reading today. This is the Greek word "*Makarios*." *Makarios* is sometimes translated as "happiness" or "bliss," but neither of these two words really gets to the heart of what *Makarios* is all about. In ancient Greek, the word *Makarios* was only ever used in reference to the ancient Greek gods. The kind of happiness and contentment that only a god could ever experience – never a mortal like you or me who lives with all of the worries and concerns and fears of this world. *Makarios* was completely unattainable, especially for you and I – ordinary people would never know *Makarios*.

But then as time went on, the meaning of *Makarios* expanded to include not only the gods – those existing outside of time and space – but also the dead. Those no longer encumbered by the constraints of this life. Those who had passed over to a peaceful and blissful state. I'd say those in heaven, but heaven wasn't really a concept that the ancient Greeks embraced. Nevertheless, they did believe that when we die, we do go to

a better place and have a higher existence, where we might experience *Makarios* – blessedness – a blissful happiness still not attainable by you or me – at least not right now.

And then, as time went on, the usage of this word expanded again to include not just the gods, and not just the faithful departed, but also society's elite. The wealthy. Society's upper crust. The 1%. Those who basically "lived above" everybody else and didn't have to worry about trivial things like working and putting food on the table and supporting a family. Those with tremendous material things like abundance, riches, honor, wisdom, beauty, health – the things that ordinary people didn't have, and didn't have access to – these people were considered to have been "blessed" by God because of their goodness. And therefore, they were happy. They were so big, and so beautiful, and so rich and so influential, that they had essentially "gone to the world of the gods." "Become like the gods" even in this life. Supremely happy and without a care in the world. Those on whom God smiled.

So file that away in the back of your mind for a minute, while we turn again to today's scripture reading.

At the end of Matthew chapter 4, we are in the very first few days of Jesus' ministry. He's just been baptized; he's spent 40 long days in the wilderness, coming face-to-face with his deepest longings and deepest vulnerabilities, discovering what it meant to be the son of God, and yet, human. He begins his ministry; he calls his first disciples; and he begins preaching, and teaching, and travelling throughout Galilee. We are told that he "cures every disease and sickness among the people." And, as you can imagine, word about him begins to spread, like wildfire. It doesn't take a smartphone and social media account to get the message out that there is something big taking place. Word of mouth does the trick too.

And we are told that they – the people who heard him speak and witnessed what he could do – they brought to him "all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics." Basically, all those who were physically and mentally un-well. So un-well that they would have had no meaningful way of providing for themselves. These were the poorest of the poor and the sickest of the sick. Those on whom ordinary people took pity. The absolute lowest rung of the ladder in society.

So we have gathered together crowds of people – ordinary people with ordinary lives and ordinary needs, mixed together with the poorest of the poor and the sickest of the sick, all together forming a crowd – a crowd of people who had needs. Who had longings. Who had worries and concerns and hungers and burdens. Those with financial problems and physical ailments and mental instability and grief and fear and uncertainty. Those who were tired. Worn out by life.

Basically, the opposite of the *Makarios*. These were not gods. These were not those who had found eternal rest from their labors. These were not those who sat on piles of wealth and looked down on everybody else and enjoyed pure bliss without a care in the world. These were those who carried the weight of the whole world on their shoulders. Those who society often looked at not as “blessed,” but as “cursed.”

And Jesus looks at the crowds, sees the people gathered hungrily around him, goes partway up the mountain, turns around to face the crowds, and begins to speak.

“*Makarios*,” Jesus calls them.

Blessed.

Existing within the realm of God.

Sacred; of infinite value.

Able to experience – not a superficial happiness – but a deep and abiding and unexplainable joy.

“You think you are lowly?” Jesus asks them. Not worth anything? Society’s trash? Doomed to live a life of exhaustion and fear and peril forever and ever, with no way out? I tell you, you are *Makarios*.”

So here is what *Makarios* really means, re-defined according to Jesus.

Makarios – blessed – are the poor in spirit. Those trampled and ready to give up hope.

Makarios are those who mourn. Who grieve. Who cry into their pillows every night.

Blessed are the meek – those who don’t prop themselves up for selfish gains, but who display their strength through service.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – who long above all else to do not what is easy, but what is right.

Blessed are the merciful. Those who forgive and extend undeserved kindness.

Blessed are the pure in heart. Those who seek only to love.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Those who bring healing and wholeness in the face of brokenness and anger.

Blessed are those who are persecuted. Those who are bullied. Those who are intimidated and tormented and frightened by the world around them.

“Here you are,” Jesus tells the crowds. “Sick, trampled, worn out, at the end of your rope, longing – hungering – for something more. Told over and over again that you are struggling in life because you are not good enough and you are not loved by God. But let me tell you who you really are. *You are Makarios*. You are blessed. You are favored by God. You are seen. You are known. You are loved. And what you are walking through in this moment – this is not all there is and you are no longer who you were. Your experience of right now does not determine your tomorrow. For you *will* inherit the earth. You *will* be comforted. You *will* be filled. You will see God. You will be called

children of God. *Makarios*. Made in the image of God, close to the heart of God, members of the Body of Christ. Partakers in the divine promise. For God is here with you now, in this moment, and God is calling you forward in hope to something beyond the right now.”

“Friends,” Jesus tells us, blessed doesn’t mean we live a life free of struggle and pain. Blessed means that we have a God to walk with us through that struggle; a God who forms us and shapes us in the midst of that struggle – teaches us while we are struggling how to become more like God: More merciful. More peaceful. Full of integrity and strength and compassion and empathy. And through that work, we discover that God brings about within us a kind of joy – a happiness – a bliss – a *Makarios* – that has nothing to do with the circumstances that we find ourselves in, but everything to do with being a beloved child of the God Most High. A citizen of the kingdom of God.

Friends, we are all tired right now. Worn out. Frustrated. And more days than not, a lot of us probably look quite a bit like the hungry crowds that gathered around Jesus – just searching for some measure of hope. But let me tell you: hope is here. God is already at work within us – transforming not necessarily our external circumstances but certainly transforming our hearts and our souls and our lives. Giving us the capacity to feel joy when happiness is in short supply. To make peace when our society is fractured. To extend mercy when revenge is the flavor of the day. To lead through service, rather than through might.

And in this transformation, we discover that we are – truly – blessed.