

#blessed

Sermon by Joanne Gallardo

Luke 6:20-31

November 3, 2019

²⁰ Looking at his disciples, he said:

*"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

²¹ *Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

²² *Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.*

²³ *"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.*

²⁴ *"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.*

²⁵ *Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.*

*Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

²⁶ *Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

²⁷ *"But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

Blessed. Or bless-ed. We use this word a whole lot. We throw it around as easily and as quickly as we do “awesome” or “fantastic.” If you follow #blessed on Instagram, you’ll find 117 million posts! If you follow #blessed with the emoji of two hands giving a high five which 9 out of 10 people mistake for hands that are praying, 3.7 million posts. And the variation of #blessed goes on, #blessedlife and #blessedfamily each get millions of tags. People sure seem really blessed. And if you’re like me and you’re curious as to why people are so blessed, the results may surprise you. Someone on the beach with their significant other...blessed. Some young woman jumping a fence with a horse in some kind of equestrian competition ...blessed. A couple kissing with the London Bridge in the background....blessed. Someone winning something at a dance competition...blessed. Someone standing in front of a new Mustang...blessed. While we see the blessedness in some or maybe all of these, people who are spiritual and those who are maybe not claim to have been shown God’s favor.

I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with this. While maybe the Mustang picture made me personally roll my eyes a bit, who am I to deny someone blessedness over something like that? Sure, with the boom of social media that word may be a bit overused, but what’s the problem with that? Isn’t claiming being blessed a show of gratitude?

Yes, except when it’s not. No one shows a picture of being slandered with the hashtag of #blessed. No one shows unpaid bills and claims to be blessed. No one takes a selfie while in the depths of despair and proclaims blessedness. This brief look at some beatitudes, from the Sermon on the Plain as found in Luke (with the actual beatitudes coming from the Sermon on the Mount as it’s found in Matthew) tell us a different story of what “blessedness” really is.

First of all, let’s take a look at the Greek word that keeps popping up in this text: makairos. Sure, blessed works. But so does “happy.” So does “unburdened” and “satisfied.” All these words mean “makairos.”

The beatitudes. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, as generally progressive folk, we love our beatitudes. Blessed are...the poor. Blessed are...the meek. Blessed are...the hated, reviled. For they shall receive something from the kingdom of heaven. God is talking about God’s saints, and this is after all, All Saints Sunday. But Jesus’ thoughts on who will be shown favor by God aren’t people with bright shiny trophies or picture-perfect marriages. Those blessed are those who have nothing, those for whom life has been harsh, those for whom day to day life is a struggle.

There’s nothing wrong with claiming to be blessed, but to imagine you have some sort of divine favor because you’re taking an awesome vacation, or just achieved something big, or have all your ducks in a row at this exact moment in time, this can give us a warped view of what blessedness really is.

According to the beatitudes, blessedness is receiving the kingdom of heaven. Blessedness is receiving mercy. Blessedness is being comforted.

Let's not forget the woes! Woe to you...is also prominently featured in this sermon by Jesus. But here we have a problem with that interpretation, too. "Ouai" isn't necessarily "damned" or "cursed." It's meant to alert people, and to get attention. "Woe" may do the trick but it certainly doesn't do the word justice. My personal favorite translation of "ouai" is "yikes!" "Yikes! You who are wealthy! You who are full! Yikes!" For those who have it easy now, or who already seem to be curating God's favor, yikes! Watch out!

But let's not throw this interpretation entirely into the eschaton. Plenty of people in the sometimes well-meaning majority tell folks who seem to have some of the toughest experiences that their reward will be in heaven. But since Luke 17:21 says the reign of God is among you, clearly some of this promise of reward is meant to be in the here and now. Jesus is actively looking to privilege the disadvantaged, and disturb those who are already comfortable.

So if we follow this to a logical conclusion, is the kingdom of God a zero-sum game? Are there winners and losers? There are those who will be told "yikes" or "woe" and those who will be called "blessed?" Shouldn't everyone be blessed in God's kingdom? Commentator and New Testament Professor Matt Skinner urges those that might have a "yikes" directed toward them to "reassess their lives in God's unfolding reign." If we take a look at our advantages, what we label as "blessedness," it's all kind of illusory. What if those things aren't really blessings? What if it's counterfeit?

Pastor Katherine Rohloff re-wrote part of the Sermon on the Plain just for this Sunday. She puts forth her interpretation as follows:

Blessed are you when you come to church looking like a mess, hoping for gas money, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you when you're feeding your kids unhealthy food because it's also the cheapest and what you can afford, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you when your throat closes up when you try to pray because your grief is overwhelming, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account who you welcome in the name of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets who welcomed the unwelcome before you.

But woe to you who have much and give little, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you whose needs are filled and yet ignore the needs of others, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who laugh in the face of suffering, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all say how "nice" and "respectable" you are, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

In this scriptural pericope we have a bit of a jump. We seem to abandon this dichotomy of "blessings" and "woes" and Jesus comes at us with a stark statement: "But I say to you listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those that abuse you.

Hold on a second. We were just talking about blessedness. Now I have to love my enemies? Now I have to pray for people that abuse me? Where did that come from?

It's easy to jump in here and say "Now wait, Jesus, are you promoting victimization? What about domestic abuse or economic exploitation?" And if you took this passage out of context, it could be saying just that. But if we read this in connection with the blessedness, the woes, the ethic of nonviolence that comes after, what might this passage be saying?

Elsewhere in the bible, we are told to discern, to test everything. You will know a person by their fruit. Be wise as serpents, innocent as doves. Are we being told here to shoulder injustice, to allow ourselves to be used and abused? No, I don't think that's what Jesus is saying.

In a recent conversation I was having with a friend, I told her that I feel like I don't trust many people. That's an overstatement and clearly not true, but in reflecting on my relationships, I realized that I approach with caution and an air of wariness at times, even with people I've known a long time. I want to be more deep and authentic in my relationships, but is that ok?

She reminded me that the very nature of relationships means the huge chance for heartache. We all let someone down in one way or another. And in my personal pursuit of the best possible relationships I missed the downside of authenticity. Being authentic also means not always being our best self. Authentic people hurt other people. Authentic people get angry with other people. Authentic people garner enemies, or at the very least, people who don't like them very much.

I want to make sure it's heard that this is by no means an excuse for folks who abuse other people. There's no excuse for that, and there's no reason, whether you're praying for that person or not, for you to stay in that type of situation. However, we would do well to acknowledge that we have hurt others just as surely as we have been hurt ourselves.

The point of this passage, I believe, is not to deny people of their dignity, but rather, to show the extravagant and nonsensical grace and mercy of God. This mercy and grace defy cultural norms and expectations. This level of mercy is unheard of, nearly unbelievable. And this passage focuses on us extending that to others. And of course we should be doing that.

What I want to challenge us with today is what if we showed that same extravagant grace and mercy towards ourselves? What if THAT is part of the "blessedness" that is talked about in the Sermon on the Plain? In the Sermon on the Mount, we are told "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." What if that mercy extended to ourselves?

Maybe this isn't an issue for you, but many of us are harder on ourselves than we need to be. Maybe it's part of our perfectionistic nature, or we have really high standards for ourselves and others. Maybe our work environment or our home life have told us that there is no room for error. After all, the famous words of Yoda tell us that there is either do or not do, there is no try. What kind of black and white all or nothing statement is that? Saying that is akin to saying our efforts don't matter, our imperfections impede us from implementing change. It's defeatist.

There certainly is “try” because in our world there is black, and white, and every shade in between.

We fail sometimes. We hurt other people. We act with an air of superiority that we didn’t necessarily mean. We snap. We overshare. We miss the deadline. We forget. We overthink. We say the wrong thing. And what this passage is telling us is that we are worthy of love. We are worthy of being shown mercy. We are good and holy enough to be prayed for. We are deserving of a second, third, and fourth chance. And what Jesus is saying, if maybe not directly, is that while we’re giving others a chance, maybe we should allow ourselves a second chance, too. God’s mercy is extravagant, and it’s not only for us to lavish onto others, but it’s there to lavish onto ourselves, as well.

This narrative comes to a very directive and nonviolent conclusion. We are told to turn the other cheek. Give not only our coat but our shirt as well. Give to all who ask. Allow others to take and use our stuff. And finally, do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

This further illustrates the open and generous nature of God. Again, a mercy and openness that defies reason. We are not to retaliate. For me, this is often difficult. While my better self has not felt the urge to act violently towards someone, I often have these thoughts of “Oh, I could have said this,” or “I should have said that.” They are usually words of retaliation meant to make the other person feel bad. For me personally, turning the other cheek often means to just shut up, which is hard for some of us to do. Mercy can look like being quiet.

We are also called to give. Yikes, as found earlier in this passage, to those of us who have more than we need. Maybe the stuff we hold on to tightly really isn’t ours to begin with.

And of course, our actions and feelings towards others should be like how we ourselves would like to be treated. While that in itself seems simple enough, it’s yet another ask on top of a huge pile of comfort-zone stretching, at least for those of us firmly planted in our North American context.

Again, I feel the need to say that Jesus isn’t necessarily pushing us toward allowing ourselves to be used or victimized. We are not being called to give until we are completely depleted. We are not called to give until we lose ourselves, or forget where we end and others begin. We are not meant to be like *The Giving Tree*, the children’s book by Shel Silverstein where a tree gives and gives to a very needy little boy until all that’s left is a stump, and in the end, the little boy (then an old man) chooses to sit on the stump). That’s both unhealthy and a very delightful (yet sad) illustration of poor boundaries.

The task of us as Christians reading the Bible in the context of today is to discern when things apply and don’t apply. Giving of yourself until there is nothing left of you or to you isn’t a workable solution. Giving until you’re uncomfortable may be a way to follow the spirit and not the letter of the law. What Jesus is trying to do here is illustrate what happens when grace and generosity so extravagant, so freely given, so unconditional that it defies cultural norms and expectations looks like. What does it mean for you to give extravagantly? What does it mean

for you to be so generous that you're giving up some things that had previously made you comfortable? What would it mean if the grace you so freely gave others, you gave to yourself?

Jesus is doing theology here in the midst of the communion of saints. This theology creates a new social norm. Jesus describes this community as a bit odd. It loves beyond boundaries, gives indiscriminately, and yields of itself nonviolently. It defies who typically experiences happiness and how. It does not conform to cost-benefit analysis. Jesus wants more than just having us see the world differently. We are called to act differently. We are called into a new existence. Our culture is formed and sustained by the mercy of God. "Yikes!" to those who are missing opportunities to experience tangibly both the giving and receiving of mercy.

Everyone is called to this new reality...absolutely everyone. But you can only participate insofar as you can participate in Christ's calling to enter into true solidarity with those who find themselves destitute, underfed, mournful, and vilified. Look out for what blessedness you are missing.

Which brings us back to this concept of blessedness. With all this in mind, the nonviolence, the extreme mercy, what does it mean to be blessed? Does it mean that perfect shot near the London Bridge with your significant other? That new Mustang? Or does it mean finally allowing yourself to breathe out a breath you didn't know you were holding? Does it mean forgiving yourself for a situation that you couldn't help 20 odd years ago? Does it mean forgiving someone else of that situation they couldn't help 20 odd years ago? Does it mean finally letting go and moving on from that one big hurt? Does it mean forgiving yourself for that thing you shouldn't have said? And the question is not "Did we earn it? Did they earn it?" This new theology of grace that Jesus lays out here in Luke does not take words like "worthy" or "deserving" into consideration. That's not the question, that's not even relevant. What if we did away with the transactional nature of our grace? What if blessedness, REAL blessedness, is the ability to do just that? The ability to give and to receive mercy? The ability to be in solidarity with those who have little to nothing? The ability to empathize and love those who are constantly maligned?

I haven't forgotten that it's All Saints Sunday. This past year we've said goodbye to some really wonderful people, and we want to make sure we remember them today especially. What if today's scripture reading, including the blessedness and mercy, apply to what Hebrews calls our great cloud of witnesses? What if we remember all the ways they have blessed us and shown us mercy, and then allow ourselves that same mercy in our moving on? In our struggling to move on? In our dealings with our memories? In our interactions with others? I believe our great cloud of witnesses now has a fuller understanding of blessedness, a better sense of what it means to show mercy. With them watching, I hope we can open ourselves to the change that comes with knowing that those who have finished the race now rest in the loving arms of God.

Our blessedness comes in the form of something unexpected. Our blessedness is promised right when we think everything has gone wrong. Our blessedness isn't about material items, or acclaim, or collection of wealth, but about mercy, goodness, and love.

Our blessedness can be found in solidarity with the poor, the broken, and the lonely. Yikes to those of us who claim to have it all together. Yikes to those of us who seem untouchable, unchangeable, unrelenting. Blessed are those of us who don't have it right, who need help, who are looking to change, who aren't perfect...for ours is the kingdom of God. Amen.