

Undaunted Blessedness

Matthew 5:1-12 (The Message): *When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said: You're blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the one most dear to you. You're blessed when you're content with just who you are — no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought. You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink and the best meal you'll ever eat. You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for. You're blessed when you get your inside world — your mind and heart — put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. His persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. Not only that — count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens — give a cheer, even! — for though they don't like it, I do! All heaven applauds! And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.*

How many of you had grandmothers who told you to “count your blessings”?

I did, and when I think back, she sometimes got on my nerves. A couple times when I tried to tell my grandmother about something that was going wrong, she would listen, smile, and then say, “Laurie, this is the kind of time to count your blessings.”

And at that time I would sigh and think, “She doesn’t get it! I’m hurting and I don’t want to count my blessings right now.” And then, to appease her, I’d rattle off things like food, clothes, maybe the new bracelet I got for my birthday or my family and friends. Blessings ...

And the conversation would usually end up with her telling me that I should never forget that even when life is tough, I am blessed. She would tell me I could go through hard times easier if I could remember my blessings along the way. She didn’t like “sulking.”

Frankly, while I loved my grandmother and learned much from her about faith and hard work, I didn’t like those conversations. Sometimes a child just needs to be heard and doesn’t want to be counting their blessings!

Blessed When We Are Poor, Meek, Persecuted?

Jesus, in this first section of what is called “The Sermon on the Mount,” connects blessedness and tough things, too. He connects blessedness and mourning. Blessedness and being powerless in the world. Blessedness and persecution. It seems that he is getting at something much deeper than just counting your blessings in times of trouble or sadness. But it is also confusing. We’re blessed when we are poor? When we are meek? When we mourn? Blessed? Really?

Let’s take a closer look at this text.

It starts out by telling us that crowds were following Jesus. Last week, we looked at the last part of Matthew where Jesus learned that John the Baptist has been arrested and kind of “took the baton of the ministry” and went to Galilee to start his ministry. And we read that many people started following Jesus because of his teaching and because people were being healed from all kinds of diseases.

Jesus must have needed some “time away” from the crowds, because today’s scripture reading starts out by telling us that he went up to the mountains with his disciples to get away from the crowds.

And then the text tells us that he sat down. OK, this is one of those details for us to pay attention to. Why would we need to know he sat down? It makes sense that if he was tired and getting away he would sit, doesn’t it? Why does the author tell us this?

Well, “sitting down” is also a way of saying that he was getting ready to teach his disciples. In that day, when a rabbi sat down, it was time to teach and get intimate and discuss things. Nowadays, a teacher or preacher will stand up when he or she wants to communicate something important, but in Jesus’ day, when a rabbi “sat down” with his people, something very important and essential was happening.

So Jesus sat down. He was getting ready to teach his disciples and share with them on a very intimate level. He’s not going to give them sound bites here. He is sitting to have a deep and intimate discussion. These words tell us that what we are about to read is meant to get to the very heart of what it means to follow Jesus and enter Kingdom living.

Jesus Said: You *ARE* Somebody!

And actually, for the next three chapters in Matthew we get Jesus’ teaching. Most Bible scholars believe that these three chapters are a summary of some of Jesus’ main teachings and didn’t necessarily all happen at one time. It is Jesus “Greatest Hits” sermons, if you will — the crux of all his teaching and preaching.

And this teaching starts with this list of what we call “The Be-attitudes.”

It is a list of conditions in which, in God’s Kingdom, people are counted as “blessed.”

We talk about blessings and being blessed a lot in the church. What does this really mean? To be blessed? To receive and understand this state of blessedness?

First, let’s think about what things were like in Jesus’ day when he told his disciples that they were blessed. In Jesus’ day the Romans were in charge. To be honored by the Romans, have the money and power of the Romans, and/or a seat at the table with the Romans was what everyone wanted. And those who weren’t Romans were shamed.

Pastor David Lose, a Lutheran pastor and preaching professor, says Roman culture was a culture of “honor and shame.” So, for Jesus to announce to his followers that they could pronounce blessedness — blessing — was incredibly countercultural and powerful! It’s like Jesus was saying something like this, “Roman Guards may be hanging around you with swords, and people may look down on you because you are poor and Jewish or non-Roman, but no worries — your identity is in something deeper. You belong to God — you are blessed. You are somebody!”

Pastor Lose also says that while our culture is not necessarily like the Romans — with a focus on honor and shame — our culture has its own focus. He says we live in a culture that focuses on affirmation and blame. He invites us to announce blessedness in the face of that. What does he mean?

Today: Empty Affirmation and Blame

Affirmation. Affirming others for their talents and gifts is a good thing. But in our culture, it can often be empty. For example, we do a lot of affirming of children these days for just participating in things. Many of us remember when we had to earn medals by working and winning at something. But nowadays children can get a medal for just showing up.

That kind of affirmation isn’t bad. When people show up and try, that is surely worth

something. We need more people just to “show up” in our world. But this kind of affirmation also doesn’t go deep. Kids know it. We know it. There can be an emptiness to it. And in it we don’t value the tenacity and depth of going deep — facing our anxieties and fears — and getting our roots down into the mire and watching something grow.

And along with empty affirmation, our culture is rife with blaming. All we have to do is look at Facebook posts and Twitter feeds and listen to the news and we hear blaming and putdowns for every little and big wrong among us. When things go wrong, now more than ever in American culture we don’t go deep to figure things out — we blame.

It also seems that we are living at a time in our nation when the value of “might makes right” is also rising to the surface in a new way. Buy a gun, build a wall, shut them down, keep them out. All that kind of language and action has taken priority over listening, working together, finding common ground, or building community.

God’s Blessings are not Daunted

In the face of these empty affirmation, blaming and “might makes right” attitudes, the Beatitudes invite us to go deeper, to receive meaning and call for our lives amid the mire and muck and losses of life. The Beatitudes invite us to receive our identity from God’s values and not the world’s values. And, when we are given the gift to do this, we are blessed. These Beatitudes name some of the most painful places we humans travel — our poverty, our losses, our betrayals — and tell us that even in those places we are blessed. God is with us. Something deep can happen and grow in these places, because God’s blessings are NOT daunted by the hardships of life. The blessedness of God is dauntless!

Maybe that is what my grandmother was trying to teach me to do. She wasn’t being cold or just trying to say “suck it up.” It wasn’t just a platitude. She was trying to get me to go deeper. To look for meaning — for blessedness — in a reality that was deeper and more at the bedrock of

life than the circumstances that were causing me trouble.

And maybe that is the reality of Kingdom living. We are invited to connect with a deep and profound sense of blessedness that we have been given by God. We are invited to really LIVE and to enter the joys and sorrows of life, the places of togetherness and the places of deep brokenness. We are invited to enter these places and live there and find God with us there. When we do, we learn in new and deeper ways what it means to be a blessed people. The world of affirmation and blame and “might makes right,” a world which is often trying to avoid pain, doesn’t understand this kind of living.

As many of you know, we are involved with a Pub Theology group that meets on Thursday nights down at The Livery. One of the things this group talks about often is the meaning of life. What actually gives life meaning and value and purpose? These Beatitudes point to this “Meaning.”

A Spontaneous Song

A middle-aged white man I know told me a story recently. This person was part of a ministry that did food deliveries to people’s home about 20 years ago in Benton Harbor. Similar to our food pantry, the church would get referrals for people who needed food and then would go and deliver the food on Sunday afternoons.

This person told me that one day he went to an old woman’s home. She lived in humble circumstances and obviously didn’t have resources for food. He went to the door, she looked him in the eye, graciously welcomed him and, after receiving the bag he brought, she started singing a hymn to him. She was singing from a place of joy and hope deep within, and it moved him. The power of her joy and faith came out in song spontaneously to a stranger. The man said, “She gave me much more than I gave her that day.” He said he almost didn’t feel worthy of

receiving this kind of blessing from her. She knew her own blessedness and was not reticent to claim it and pour it out in blessing to others.

That is a glimpse of what a sense of “undaunted blessedness” looks like.

The gift of blessedness looks like this:

- That we are blessed when we are at the end of our rope, because God is there to lead us.
- That we are blessed when we have lost much, because in that emptiness and aching and doubt we find ourselves wrestling and reaching out for faith in new and deeper ways.
- That we are blessed when the world doesn’t understand our struggle, because it is then that we have to pull together and rely on God’s strength in our weakness.
- That we are blessed when we are confused and don’t know the way, because we have to pray more and dig deep and listen more deeply and try out new things and follow clouds and pillars of fire.

Now let’s not be Pollyannaish here. Part of blessedness is facing our pain and grieving with all our souls and raising our fists in anger at injustice. We must not deny the reality of these feelings, nor deny that it often doesn’t feel very blessed to have these feelings. Most often, it just feels awful! But the blessedness comes as we are real and as God is born once again into our lives, smack dab in the middle of all that.

From Family’s Grief, a Blessed Closeness

This week I saw two examples of this kind of blessedness — one was in a family and the other was in our community. I’m going to disguise the family story a little to honor the family’s confidentiality.

I got to know a woman at the Hanson Hospice Center the past couple months. She was brought

there to die from another part of the Midwest to be with family. And it became apparent to me that her children were at odds over how to handle her situation. This dissension among them was not new. They disagreed on politics and a variety of other things, and they handled these deep divisions by being nice to each other when they had to be together. They would never get truly close or intimate. They played the “we are the nice family” game that many of us do to keep peace among us.

But when crisis strikes, we can’t play those games anymore. And this family had to get into the mire and really talk things out. How would they take care of Mom? Who would visit her? Who would handle details? Could they trust each other? And there were even more questions.

But as they worked these things out — all while grieving their mom’s decline — a new closeness developed. They were blessed as they mourned and felt at the end of their rope. As they had the courage to go deep, their intimacy as a family deepened. This dear woman died this week, and I was moved by the closeness and unity of the family — especially knowing how far they had come. As they grieved and struggled and fought and made peace, something new was born by God’s grace. They were blessed. They *are* blessed.

School Crisis is a Blessing

And I believe our community and the other communities connected to the Benton Harbor Area Schools district may be in a position right now where we are receiving some blessedness. As many of you know, our school board and superintendent have been working with the Michigan Departments of Education and Treasury for many years in dealing with financial difficulties, low achievement on tests, and declining enrollment because of schools of choice and other causes. There have been anxiety and pain, infighting and lashing out, and frustrated parents and teachers and school board members all trying to help the district find its way.

Last week the School Reform Office — which is not connected to the Department of Ed or the

Department of Treasury, and without the knowledge of Benton Harbor Area Schools — sent out letters to parents of students at Martin Luther King Jr. STEAM Academy, the Dream Academy, and Hull International School indicating that these schools may be closing on June 30 due to three years of low test scores. Parents were given the option to start looking for new schools within a 30-mile radius of where they live.

The issues are too complex to go into in a sermon. But there were two community meetings this week, one led by the school board and one led by Mayor Muhammad. There is another important community forum coming up this Wednesday at Martin Luther King Jr. STEAM Academy, and many follow-up steps are in the works.

I have not seen unity like this ever in my years of walking with urban communities. Amid this pain and uncertainty, parents, students, community members, pastors, lawyers, teachers, and school board members are coming together, and true plans are emerging. After the meeting on Thursday night, a number of us were in the mayor’s chambers, and he made us all promise that we would work for UNITY and help us keep our eyes on the prize of saving our schools and not let infighting and blaming distract us.

As a community, we will have to go deep and receive a deep blessedness. But God is not daunted by our circumstances. We are at the end of our rope, but we will hold onto hope, and I hope we will all follow our mayor’s advice and work for unity.

God will bless and lead us. But this will take work, determination and courage.

‘Blessed and Highly Favored’

You see, the blessedness of God is dauntless, though we surely don’t understand it or even know how to receive it.

In this community, when you asked a person how they are, they will often say, “I’m blessed” or “I’m blessed and highly favored!” Some of the people who struggle the most will say that, will claim that.

This week, may we be open to receiving this blessedness in new ways, and may we be people who go around and share the blessedness. There is so much fear and anguish right now with many changes happening in our country and world. Here in Benton Harbor there is fear born from the history of racial pain and violence, and now three schools are on the brink of closing.

Amid all that, let us go around blessing people. Smile at people. Say a prayer for them. Say a prayer for your enemies and those you disagree with. As you touch a chair, pray that God will bless the person who sits in it next.

Let us be a people who, no matter what is thrown in our faces, walk into the room with our heads held high because we are blessed.

Let us be people who continue to seek to bless all we see — rich, poor, black, white, gay, straight, educated, uneducated.

Indeed, let’s close this sermon by blessing each other now. Reach out your hands. Look around the room at all your brothers and sisters and announce, “You are blessed and highly favored and nothing — absolutely nothing — in all creation can separate us from God’s love or from the state of being the blessed of God.”

Amen!

“Undaunted Blessedness”
Sermon Delivered January 29, 2017

First Presbyterian Church of Benton Harbor
The Rev. Laurie Hartzell