

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

How often have we heard a friend or an acquaintance talk with great enthusiasm about how blessed they are that they've gotten a new job, or that the child they worried about had gotten into college or that no one in their family had suffered any serious illnesses? Sometimes we do the same thing in our own enthusiasm and gratitude about our good fortune. But stop and think for a minute. If we feel that God has 'blessed' us with economic security or successful children or good health does that mean that the converse is true...that those who do not have economic security or successful children or good health have NOT been blessed by God and are therefore not loved by God as the 'blessed ones' are? Stop and think about that for a minute. That's probably not what you think, is it? So what does it mean when God blesses us? What does that look like? I have found myself saying I am SO blessed less and less as I get older, not because my life is harder, but because I know that I am blessed even when everything is going wrong...and there have certainly been times in my life when that was the case!! Sometimes there is a greater blessing hidden in those tough times. In the Gospel lesson that we just heard, we hear Jesus telling 5000 people who are sitting on a hillside beside the Sea of Galilee exactly the opposite of 'prosperity equals blessing'! Jesus is actually telling them and us that we are blessed when our backs are against the wall. That doesn't sound logical, does it? So let's take a closer look.

What people are referring to in our day and age when they talk about all their 'blessings' which include health, wealth and happiness is what is known as the Prosperity Gospel. Episcopalians do not subscribe to the Prosperity Gospel. We do not believe that God shows his love for us by showering us with material wealth, good health and an upscale social position. God is not Santa Claus. God doesn't grant us our every wish for creature comforts because we get down on our knees and ask for them. Jesus is correcting that notion. Jesus is talking about blessings that arrive along with the hard times. Jesus sounds almost subversive to the American ear, doesn't he? The word 'blessed' in our culture has been hijacked to mean wealth and health and power. And that's exactly the opposite of what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is telling those folks sitting on the hill by the side of the Sea of Galilee that it is the poor, the sick, and the meek who are going to be entitled to the blessings of the new kingdom. And it's Jesus' mission to teach all of us not only about the nature of God, but also the nature of God's kingdom. Does that mean that Jesus is telling us that in order to get into the kingdom of God at the end of this life we are

going to have to suffer and be miserable during this life? That doesn't sound like a very good deal to any of us, does it? But that's probably not what Jesus is trying to teach us.

So what *is* Jesus trying to teach us? The problem with the term 'blessed' is that it sounds a little unreal...like a quality that applies only to those saints whose stories we celebrate on All Saints Day and whose example may appear a bit unattainable to us. Most of us know that we are never going to be included in a volume of Holy Women Holy Men. That's only for people whose works in this life far surpass the ordinary and are far beyond our reach. Not one of us is going to be Mother Teresa or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. So what do Jesus' words mean for us? He's speaking to us. What does he want us to understand?

Let's start with looking at how we understand the meaning of this life and the meaning of the life to come. We are people of the resurrection, so we are believers in a life beyond this one. In some respects, this life is the training ground or the preparation time for the life to come. In this life we are to learn the things we need to know and build our inner selves in such a way that we will be prepared to enter into the Kingdom of God when the time comes and we will know how to function there. The more practice we get here, the better and the greater the chance that the Kingdom of God will be introduced into this life. The more we grow spiritually in this life, the better off we will be...and the better off we will be in the next life.

Let's take a look at some of the translations used in the Bible for 'blessed' since we're trying to figure out what Jesus is telling us in these Beatitudes. For example, the Greek word 'makarioi' is sometimes translated as 'happy.' We've all heard the Beatitudes in some Biblical translations as 'happy are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.' The word 'happy' doesn't really fit with mourning nor with persecution. No one is 'happy' when they are grieving or when they are being persecuted even if they know and believe that eventually there will be a good outcome. 'Happy' is not the word we would use to describe them.

Perhaps a better translation might be the use of the Hebrew word 'Ashar' that we see in Psalm 1 and is translated there into English as 'happy.' However, the word 'Ashar' actually means 'you are on the right road.' That might make even more sense than 'blessed.' For example, 'you are on the right road' if you are meek because you will inherit the earth. Or 'you are on the right road' if you are persecuted for righteousness sake, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Or 'you are on the right road' if you are a peacemaker because you will be called children of God. Being aware of our poverty of spirit is being 'on the right road.' And Jesus tells us that if we are poor in spirit, ours is the kingdom of heaven. Each 'blessing' in the Beatitudes calls on us to make a discovery about ourselves, about the world we live in and about the nature of the kingdom of God...being merciful, for example. That's the first part. The second part of the 'blessing' provides us with a promise...you shall obtain mercy. To Jesus, these beatitudes are simple facts,

not moral imperatives. Jesus is simply telling us: “this is how my Father’s world works.” And it has nothing to do with health or wealth or power.

All of us can look back historically and see the righteousness of many historical figures who *did* end up in the book Holy Women Holy Men because of their willingness to do and say what is right and true rather than live their lives chasing after wealth and power. The Beatitudes point toward the ethical standards that line up with life in God’s kingdom. They are a call to action in *this* life about how we will use our lives here because this life is short and it’s all the preparation time we have to get us ready for eternity. Jesus is telling us to focus on our future hope as well as on our current reality.

In this life we are the church militant still struggling together to live as Jesus instructs us to live in the midst of a broken world because we know that one day we will be a part of the church triumphant which includes all the saints who have gone before us and have received their eternal rest. It’s what we celebrate today on All Saints Day...the communion of saints on both sides of the veil. Those of us who are here and those we love who are there already in the kingdom of God. In this life, it is still a struggle to live a Christian life, but we are in community with those whose lives have been made perfect on the other side of the veil.

The Beatitudes are about the nature of God, not about the character of Christians. We fall short routinely, but God never falls short or lets us down. Jesus calls us to walk this pathway not because he’s laying down specific rules, but because he knows this life is hard. He’s calling us to walk with him and he promises to walk with us. Jesus wants us to be schooled in the ways of the kingdom of God so that when we face that reality, we are prepared. This life is the practice ground and Jesus Christ is the all-star coach. Flex your spiritual muscles in the repetitive actions of Christian conduct. This is a short life. We don’t have as much time as we think. We can’t afford to postpone following Jesus’ directions about how to prepare ourselves in this life for the next life. We need to focus not only on a future hope, but on the current reality as well because this is the practice field. There are those on the other side of the veil waiting patiently for us. When we arrive, we want to be ready!

And this practice field at the moment is full of treachery and is offering each of us all kinds of opportunities to call on God to help us. We are in the midst of a worldwide pandemic that hounds every single human being on the planet with an invisible killer that can strike any of us at any moment with no warning. That’s a high anxiety experience that we have been living with for eight months. And we don’t know how much longer it will be this way. And if we didn’t have enough anxiety around the pandemic, we in the United States are also awaiting the outcome of a highly emotional and anxiety provoking national election the results of which we probably won’t know for weeks. There is no doubt that God is being called upon on a daily basis right now, not only by the people who do that routinely, but by the people who have become more

aware of God and their need for God in these circumstances. Blessed are those who deal with chronic anxiety for they shall be reassured.

It is the greatest blessing in the world to be consciously aware of God and to be in conversation with God frequently. We are 'on the right road' when we are talking things over with God, when we listen for God to stir within us, when we are aware of God's presence with us and when we recognize God's interventions in our lives. Being 'on the right road' in preparing ourselves for entrance into the kingdom of God has never been about health, wealth or power and it never will be. Being aware of our own dependence on God and making God a part of our daily lives and knowing that God loves us and is faithful to us is the greatest blessing of all.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.