

Micah 6:1-8
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12
Psalm 15

We live in a country of great opulence even though there are those among us who don't have enough of anything. Those of us who do have all we need.....and more.....are often tempted to think or to say, "I am so blessed!" I've said it myself when I am especially thankful for something good in my life.....or perhaps the multiple things that are good in my life. It seems like the right thing to say. And that's actually the premise of what is known as the Prosperity Gospel which maintains that good things in your life mean that you have been favored by God. That was a common way of thinking in Jesus' day and it still is among many people today. But stop and think for a minute about the converse of that statement of being blessed by God with good things or an easy life. Does that mean that people who can't pay the bills or have fallen into ill health or who aren't able to have a baby when they want one are NOT blessed? If being blessed is the abundance of all good things, then is the absence of those things an indication of NOT being blessed?

That's not what Jesus says. Jesus says that the opposite is true.

The gospel lesson this morning finds Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. He has just called his first disciples. In and around the Sea of Galilee, he taught in the synagogues and he cured every disease and every sickness among the people. His fame spread and lots of people began to follow him. When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up into the mountains just as Moses had gone up to the top of the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. And he sat down as a rabbi.....a teacher.....would do.....and he began to talk to the disciples who had gone with him up the mountain. Jesus' mission was to proclaim the kingdom of God and that's exactly what he began to do. What followed were all the "Blesseds" that we call the Beatitudes and they are Jesus' description of the kingdom he has been sent to proclaim.

When Jesus begins to speak, he talks about not only what will happen when the kingdom arrives on earth, but several of the Beatitudes are in the present tense.....blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.....meaning that access to the kingdom of God can come while we are on earth. It's not simply something that will happen after we die and enter eternal life.

But his descriptions of the folks who are blessed.....both now and in the kingdom to come.....don't match with how we think about being blessed. Who in the world feels blessed when they are poor in spirit? And who would feel blessed about being persecuted for Jesus' sake? And who wants to be someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness but can't get it because all attempts to get righteousness.....meaning a right relationship with God in this world

seem to be thwarted? None of these things sound good and we associate 'blessedness' with things that are good.

Maybe if we take a look at the Greek word *makarios* that is routinely translated as 'blessed' we can figure some of this out. *Makarios* has several possible translations. It can be translated as 'happy' or 'fortunate' or 'privileged.' Maybe these different translations can help us figure out what 'blessed' means in these verses?

Jesus is describing for us the people who inhabit the kingdom of God.....in this world and in the world to come.....as well as what the nature of the kingdom of God actually is.

He's talking about the personal qualities of people and the circumstances of people that actually give us access to God.

Let's experiment with those other possible translations of the Greek *makarios*.

'Privileged' are those who mourn for they will be comforted. When hearts are broken, God has access to us in ways that are impossible when things are going well. When we are heartbroken, we know that we are not in charge....we know that we are not powerful over our own circumstances.....and even if we rail at God in anger about the circumstances that broke our hearts, we are at least interacting with God. We are in relationship with God in our shouts of despair and futility and absolute fury with God. We are talking to God. We are aware of God. And in our misery God is with us. It is a 'privilege' to be in circumstances that so keenly put us in the presence of God.

'Fortunate' are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. To be poor in spirit is to be flat on our backs.....to be emptied out.....we don't have any more. We are still and we are quiet. There's no more energy. To be poor in spirit is to be wide open to the possibilities and presence of God. When we are full of spirit, we are also full of ourselves. We are cluttered with all the busyness of life, with our own preoccupations, with our own striving to reach goals or make dreams come true. We are 'fortunate' when our own spirit is depleted because when it is, we have room for God to move in. We have room for the Holy Spirit, not just our own spirit. We have gotten out of God's way and God is now able to fill us up.

'Happy' are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. The peacemakers are the ones who set their own agendas and their own egos aside in service to others. They facilitate neighbor loving neighbor without any thought to their own welfare or their own agenda. They are the ones who set themselves and their own wants and needs aside.....just like Jesus did....in service to others. And they bring people into relationship with each other and with God. These are the people who will be called children of God because they do just as Jesus did.

So being "blessed" is being in circumstances that gives God access to us.....or having the nature and disposition that allows us to give God that access.

So what does it *feel* like to be 'blessed'? If you've ever had the blessing of someone you love.....perhaps a parent of someone older and wiser than you.....maybe someone that you look up to.....you know how powerful that blessing can be. When we receive a blessing from someone we love we feel uplifted, we feel supported, we feel emboldened, we feel validated and confirmed. These are all such potent feelings. We know that the person blessing us is endorsing us and believes in us. It's a precious and cherished experience.

And we know what it feels like NOT to receive a longed for blessing from one we love and admire. It is disappointing. It is hurtful. It is shame-filled. We walk away feeling demoralized and rejected. It's a terrible feeling and it is just as powerful. We do not have the stamp of approval that we were yearning for and without that blessing, we feel alone to tackle whatever life brings.

There are many stories in the Bible about blessings. In ancient Israel, it was the birthright of the oldest son in each family.....to be blessed by the right hand of the father in the family was to be endorsed as the one who would carry the family into the future.....the one who would be the head of the family in the next generation. To receive that blessing was to be the chosen one. It was powerful and it meant everything.

The amazing thing is, that in Jesus' description of those who are blessed, he describes the very ones who are the least likely to be the 'chosen ones' in this life. God's blessing goes to those who are struggling, to those who suffer, to those who are heartbroken and to those whose egos have long since been diminished. The wonderful thing about the blessing of God is that it comes to us freely; it is given to us without our having to earn it; it is bestowed upon us purely because of who we are, not because of anything we have done.

God's blessing is one that we cannot earn. God loves us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves and he blesses us. God loves us no matter what our temperament or disposition. He gives us his endorsement and he walks along side us. The beatitudes emphasize the emptiness and the absolute dependence of human beings upon divine grace. The blessing of God also speaks to the goodness, not the sinfulness, of humanity. A blessing of God is God's optimism about us and our ability to live into a better self and a deeper relationship with God. God's blessing is all about God's grace.

Blessed is each of us in whatever our circumstances happen to be.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.