

January 29, 2017: The Great Invitation: Blessed



I've discovered over the past year or two that teaching children manners is fun and challenging... and with my girls... often adorable. The phrase "God bless you" is one that my girls now have down... to the point where if they sneeze and I don't say it quick enough, after giving me the eye, they say, "Bless me!" Like, "fine, if you're not going to bless me, then I will!" It's as if they intrinsically KNOW the value and benefit of being blessed, and can't wait to receive it! Blessings are something we don't usually think about... When someone sneezes, we say, "Bless you", when we're in church we might say or hear, "have a blessed week", or if you ask someone how they are, they could respond, "I'm blessed!" But what does it mean to receive a blessing? What does it mean to be called blessed?

The phrase "God bless you" has been around for a long while but rose in use and popularity in the middle ages... for when someone sneezed you said "God bless you" fearing that they might have the plague and need God's blessing. What WE know (and teach our kids) as a polite response, developed as a way to ward off fear of evil, disease, and death. (Make the sign of the cross)

In ancient Greece, only the gods were thought to be "blessed." Existing largely on Mt. Olympus, they lived a life of ease and joy. Human beings were never considered blessed in the same way as the gods, but Greeks came to believe that to the extent humans had the characteristics of the gods they could experience happiness. The word "blessed" came to describe this sort of happiness.

Every community has its own definition of what constitutes blessedness. We live in a world where prosperity, power, fame and independence are understood by many to be the keys that unlock happiness in this life. Thrive in these areas, and life becomes about as good as it can be. We may not always use such a pious word, preferring instead to call it "the good life" or "success." But we all have definitions of what it means to have made it. In our day, when we think of someone who is blessed we most often think of someone who is wealthy or powerful or famous or successful or beautiful or enviable in some way. Blessings, at least according to the standards of this world, are most often of the material kind.

But Jesus meant something entirely different when he used the word "Blessed" as the opening word of his teaching ministry in Matthew. Jesus teaches us to see how God calls blessed those who are down and out, distressed by their circumstances, passionate about promoting righteousness and working for peace, or persecuted for doing the right thing. Who is blessed? Not the wealthy, but the poor in spirit. Not the carefree, but those who mourn. Not the strong, but the meek. Not those who are filled and satisfied, but those who hunger and thirst. Not the corrupt, but the pure in heart. Not the conqueror, but the peacemaker. Not those who are political insiders, but those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

In this way, blessedness has nothing to do with our merit or our worthiness or our bootstraps. Being blessed is all about God. It's about the assurance that God goes with us, that God is present both in our messes and in our marvels, our failures and our successes. We are not alone, ever... God is always with us, blessing us along the way.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he isn't making a statement of cause and effect. He isn't saying you are blessed with the kingdom of heaven because you are poor in spirit. He isn't saying you are blessed with comfort because you are in mourning.

What Jesus is doing here is pronouncing a blessing on the people who have gathered as he begins to teach. He is giving a blessing to all the people who have come to hear him. He is blessing them for a purpose. He is blessing them to think differently about the way the world works because of what he is teaching and doing. He is describing how we are to live as God's people in this world—not simply by calling attention to all the many ways God has "blessed" us personally—but by being a blessing for others.

This was a radically new teaching for the people in Jesus' day. In the ancient world, just like today, many people believed strongly in cause and effect. They believed that if they were good people who followed God's commandments, worked hard, and tried to do their best in all circumstances, God would reward them with good health, food to eat, stable jobs, happy families, and prosperity. Likewise, they believed that God punished the sinful with illness, poverty, imprisonment, blindness, divorce, and other personal tragedy. Many believed that God even punished entire sinful populations through war, famine, droughts, and other disasters.

If a man was sick, or mourning, or poor in spirit, or starving, or persecuted, it was his own fault for sinning. A woman who suffered did so as the consequence of her own bad behavior because suffering was understood as punishment for sin.

But Jesus is saying it doesn't work like that in the kingdom of God. It isn't that we are wrong to feel "blessed" when something goes our way. But when things do not go our way, that doesn't mean God is punishing us either. God's kingdom is a whole different playing field, and it has nothing to do with cause and effect.

Jesus blesses everyone who has gathered, no matter who they are and no matter what they have done. God's blessing in Christ is not just for the righteous ones. God's blessing is not just for certain religious groups, or certain genders, or certain sexual orientations, or certain cultural or racial groups. God's blessing is not just for those who are pure, who go to church and give to charities and treat people with kindness. And God's blessing is not evidenced by a big bank account or a fancy title or a luxury home.

In this new kingdom that Jesus is showing us, God blesses the saints and sinners alike. Jesus offers a blessing on the poor in wallet and the poor in spirit. He blesses the blind, the lame, the imprisoned, the outcast. He blesses the leper and the prostitute. He blesses the murderer and the thief and the adulterer. He blesses the Jews and the Christians, the Muslims and the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Ba'hai. He blesses the Democrats and the Republicans and the Independents alike. In Christ, God's blessing

does not discriminate. God's blessing is for all. God's blessing is for you. God's blessing is for me.

That's good news, don't you think? It means that no matter who you are or what you have done, you are blessed and you are welcomed into God's family, and there is nothing you can do, ever, to lose God's love, affirmation, and blessing.

So in this first teaching for his followers, his disciples, in his first teaching for you and for me, Jesus is telling us as clearly as he can that these people—"look around you," he says to his disciples—these people in the crowd that gathered that day near the shores of the Galilean lake—these people who live down the street and let their kids run wild, these people who don't work and are collecting welfare, these people who are in jail for dealing drugs, these people who got pregnant out of wedlock and now want an abortion, these people who are members of a gang, these people who are members of a white supremacist group, these people who are chanting blacklivesmatter, these people who sit in judgment, these people who pray to Allah, these people who carry guns into Walmart, these people who are crazy feminists, these people who are pro-life, these people who are pro-choice. . .well, you get the idea. Jesus his telling his disciples that ALL THESE PEOPLE are blessed.

And we who call ourselves disciples, followers of Jesus Christ, need to not just understand this, but we need to live it out by our words and our actions. We need to treat each other as blessed. Whether we agree or not, whether we look alike, think alike, pray alike, or not... We are all blessed, in it is in our blessing, that we may be a blessing to others. May it be so. Amen.