

THE BEATITUDES: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BLESSED?

Psalm 91
Matthew 5:1-12

Faith Community
February 21, 2010

Introduction

Kate and I are going to be doing a series of sermons during Lent on the Beatitudes of Jesus. It will cover the next four weeks - up to the cantata on March 28.

For many people the beatitudes seem to be contradictory. “Blessed are those who mourn...” What is blessed about mourning? Or “Blessed are those who are persecuted...” Most people would find that a blessing they could pass up. What Jesus calls blessed here, most of us don’t think of as blessings. We’ll be exploring what Jesus meant and why it’s important to us.

I

To put the beatitudes in context, they are part of the Sermon on the Mount. They happen fairly early in Jesus’ ministry as he is up on the hillside speaking to lots of people. You may have noticed that when something is especially important, it often takes place on a mountain or the top of a hill. Moses goes up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments; Jesus’ transfiguration happens on a mountain top. It’s like a clue that this is important. There is a sense in which these events at the top of a mountain are literally taking us closer to God.

I wonder about the people who first heard these words from Jesus. He’s only been preaching for a short time. They probably don’t know too much about him, and all of a sudden he comes out with “Blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek... blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you.” Wouldn’t the people sitting on that hillside listening to Jesus wonder what in the world they had gotten themselves into? “Is this guy serious? I’ve got enough problems as it is, I don’t think I need to be ‘blessed’ with all that!”

I find it strange that Jesus doesn’t go on to explain what he means. He just drops these short, pithy statements and leaves them there. There isn’t any explanation of how the mourners are blessed or why persecution is good news. I sometimes wonder how many people walked out when they heard what Jesus had to say.

II

In the Good News Bible the word “blessed” is translated “Happy” as in “Happy are the poor in spirit.” That is a legitimate translation of the word. But it may be confusing for a lot of us.

When you and I think of happy, we think of feeling good, of enjoying certain kinds of pleasures. Happy means our spirits are up and we’re having a good day. Some people work hard at trying to be happy. You can try to buy happiness. In fact, amusement parks and cruise lines are in the business of selling you an enjoyable experience. Come to our park or sign up for our trip and we will make it a fun experience; we will make you happy. And they often succeed.

Happiness is temporary. Not even the most positive, upbeat person in the world is happy all the time. We all face sorrow, sadness, and down days. We feel happy one day and the next we might feel depressed. A woman moved into a retirement facility and as she told her friends about it they asked, “Are you happy there?” They meant are you pleased with the place, are you enjoying living there.

I noticed on the cover of one of my wife’s magazines a headline saying, “How to be happier in the coming year.” Apparently there are ten steps you can take, and you will have a happier life. And you get all that for the \$5.95 that the magazine costs!

Happiness tends to be “me” oriented. We ask ourselves, “Am I enjoying this?” And if not, we probably move on to something else. We have the famous phrase, “Are we having fun yet?” which sometimes is a sign that we are working hard at trying to be happy. It’s about us and how we feel.

III

To be blessed is a very different experience. Blessed has to do with our souls, our inner being. It is not so much enjoying ourselves as having a sense of wellbeing. It isn’t so much fun as it is contentment or satisfaction. At a basic level it involves feeling that you are living in accord with nature and in harmony with God.

To be blessed is not a temporary condition but a long term state of being. A person can be feeling down and still talk about the ways in which she is blessed. Being blessed doesn’t change from day to day. We can go through a series of bad experiences, even horrible events and still know that we have been blessed.

The apostle Paul writes about the times he has been shipwrecked, lost at sea, beaten nearly to death, put in prison, and then he writes about the joy that comes from his faith in Christ. None of those were happy experiences, but they didn’t diminish the joy that was the foundation of his faith and life. Paul knew that he was blessed; it didn’t have to do with the fun and pleasure of each day, but with the sense of well-being he had about the purpose of his life.

IV

To be blessed is a passive experience. It is not something that we do; it is something we receive. We can’t bless ourselves, we can only accept a blessing that’s given to us. We can’t make ourselves blessed; we can only live in the way the Creator has laid out for us. To be blessed is a divine gift, and we are thankful when we realize what we have been given.

Being blessed is not about the accumulation of money or of things. Blessing doesn’t come so much from external objects as from an internal sense of wellbeing. Some people may look at all the stuff they have and talk about how they have been blessed, but most people realize being blessed has far more depth to it.

I asked a group of retirees recently how their lives had been blessed. They talked about friends who stood beside them when they went through difficult times, about the parents they had and the way they were raised, about children and grandchildren, about spouses and siblings. They also mentioned blessed circumstances that just happened without their doing anything.

None of the things they mentioned were accomplishments they had done, and they were a group who had accomplished a great deal.

When talking about being blessed every one mentioned things that were beyond their control; they didn't choose their parents, they couldn't make their friends stand beside them, and they didn't cause unique circumstances to happen in their lives. Being blessed is about receiving, not about earning.

Conclusion

It is more likely that we realize our blessings if we live in a good relationship with God. No, I'm not suggesting that if we live a certain way, God has to bless our lives, because we earned it. But when we live close to God, we often realize the goodness of God's gifts. When we live the way Jesus showed us, living for what is real, we may have a better sense of the richness of God's blessings.

Preacher Fred Craddock has written about greyhound dogs. They are those big, sleek, elegant animals. Throughout the country these dogs are raced. They set a mechanical rabbit out in front of them, and the dogs run after it as fast as they can. When the dogs get too old to race, they put an advertisement in the paper so people can take them as a pet. Otherwise they are put down.

Fred's niece can't stand the thought of this so she continually answers the advertisement and takes another one. Now she has a houseful of greyhounds, which are not small dogs. Fred was visiting one day and just sat and watched the children playing with one of the greyhounds. This big old spotted dog was lying on the floor and one of the toddlers was pulling on his tail. He didn't even move. A little older child was resting his head on the dog, using the dog's stomach as a pillow. The dog seemed so content.

So Fred asked the dog, "You aren't racing anymore?"

"No, I don't care much for racing," the dog said.

"But I'll bet you miss the lights and the excitement of those races."

"No, not really."

"Well, I guess you're too old to race anyway."

"No, actually I still have some racing in me."

"What's the problem? Weren't you winning?"

"O no, I won more than \$1million for my owner."

"What then, did he treat you badly?"

"No, they treated me royally. I had everything a dog could want."

"Did you get crippled?"

"No, no."

"So, what was it then?"

"I quit."

“You quit? You were winning, you were treated well, and you weren’t injured. Why in the world did you quit?”

The dog said, “I quit because I discovered that what I was chasing wasn’t really a rabbit. All that running and running and running, and what I was chasing wasn’t even real.”¹

Amen.

¹ See Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (eds), *Craddock Stories* (St Louis, MO, Chalice Press, 2001).