

2023 10 29 – *Blessed are You*

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Today, we are remembering those who have died and we are honouring their contributions to our lives and to the life of this church family. This day, of course, brings up memories of loved ones who are no longer with us. For some of us the grief is new and still quite sharp and for others the grief remains but has been somewhat dulled by the healing power of time.

As most of you know, my own mother died on October 1st and my siblings and I were home in Ontario a couple of weeks ago to celebrate her life. At her memorial service we chose to read a couple of scripture passages and a poem. One of those readings came from Proverbs, from a section of that book most commonly referred to as “Ode to a Capable Wife.” We thought the description of the woman in that passage was very fitting for our mother and we especially loved the verse that said, “Her children arise and call her blessed.”

The word blessed has several meanings. In this particular context, it meant that we were honouring our mother, holding her with respect and admiration. In the Christian church, especially the Roman Catholic denomination this word is often used as a description for those who have been beatified, and who may be on their way to sainthood. For example, the Blessed Virgin Mary. We, of course, were certainly not claiming that our mother was a saint, at least not in the Roman Catholic sense, anyways.

In today's scripture reading, the word, blessed, is being used in a slightly different context and the meaning is also a little bit different. At the beginning of the passage, we read that Jesus, seeing how large the crowds have become, decides to move up the side of a hill so that more people can see and hear him. He then begins to teach. Today's passage is the beginning of what is commonly referred to as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and these particular verses are known as the Beatitudes. They have been given this name because nearly all of them begin with the word, blessed.

In this particular passage, the word blessed means happy or fortunate. It has been translated from the Greek word, makarios. Jesus is listing different groups of people who he describes as blessed. Let's take a look and see who he is including in this list: those who are mourning, those who are gentle, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who show mercy, those whose hearts are clean, those who work for peace and those who are persecuted because of their struggle for justice.

Wow! That's probably not the list I would have come up with! Where are the rich, the powerful, the successful, and the famous? Why aren't they included? Aren't they happy? Aren't they fortunate, even blessed?

Well let's take another look at Jesus' list. What do all these groups have in common? If we look closely we realize that Jesus is defining these groups of people, not by roles or jobs, but by their relationship with God and with others. Those who are poor in spirit are, no doubt, seeking a deeper connection with

God. Those who mourn, first must love deeply. Those who are gentle, obviously treat others with care. Those who hunger and thirst for justice are connected with people on the margins of society. Those who show mercy to others understand the blessings of forgiveness. Those whose hearts are clean are already deeply connected to the God of Love. Those who work for peace, are able to do that by creating new relationships one stranger or even enemy at a time. Those who are persecuted because of their work for justice are sacrificing their very selves for others.

All of these groups of people are living out Jesus' commandment to love God and to love others as themselves. We are these people. It is in our deep love for our God, our neighbour and our care for the rest of God's creation that we will find true happiness or joy. It is in our relationships that we will find fortune and it is in our love-filled living that they will be blessed.

Is it possible to be powerful, rich, famous or successful and still be blessed?

Yes, as long as we also belong to one of the groups that Jesus mentioned. As long as we are also capable of deep love, gentleness, mercy, working for justice, being a peacemaker or having a clean heart.

My mother worked her whole life for others, first for her family and then for her community. Two weeks ago, we were thrilled to have the opportunity to rise and call her blessed. I know that many of you today are remembering the people in your lives who you call blessed. We know that this community of faith was built and nurtured by many who lived their lives filled with the love of God.

As Christians, as members of this congregation, we are called to follow Jesus' commandment. We are called to love God and to trust in God's love. We are called to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. St. Mother Teresa put it this way, "We are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful."

I'm going to end with a blessing by Steve-Garnaas-Holmes, a retired Methodist pastor who lives in the United States. His poem is called "Blessed are You."

Blessed are you
who guard your joy so tenderly
because you're also heartbroken for the world.

Blessed are you who, in passing moments,
feel a flutter of dread
for what is larger than you, but more threatened,
for oceans and forests, peoples and generations,
and how they might suffer,
and how you could ever let them know you loved them.

Blessed are you when you see the child on the news
and something in you collapses a little.

Blessed are you when you wake in the night
with worry for the world,

with sand in your throat for weeping
and yet who carry on in hope.

Blessed are you, for your hope is not wishing,
but trust in the unseen, already rising.

Hold your thread of grief, and do not let go;
follow it into the darkness. It will guide you.

It will not sap but strengthen your courage.

You will go on. You will be true. You will be blessed.

Your very breath is the hope of the universe moving in you.

And still, beloved, guard your joy tenderly.

It, too, is holy.

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Blessed are You.

Amen.