

BLESSED ARE THE LOWLY
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent
based on Matthew 5:1-10; Psalm 104:1-3

The sermon this morning is the second in a summer sermon series entitled, “Bless you.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

What does life look like if a person has been blessed by God? We might be inclined to say that a person who is really blessed will have a big house and a boat and a successful career and perfect health and, in the end, a long and pleasant life. But when the Bible points to a truly blessed life, it points us to Jesus, who did not have any of the things I just mentioned. To be blessed, clearly, means something other than having a lot of nice stuff. The blessed life rather, as we saw last week, is life lived in harmony with God and with God’s purpose, a life that may include considerable challenge, but which finally is a life of deep meaning and joy, which of course is exactly what we see in Jesus.

Jesus went so far as to say that people who experience a lack of good things in this world may especially be blessed. This is a prominent theme in the Beatitudes, which we heard this morning—the eight “blessed are” sayings that are the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew. These verses are called the Beatitudes because in the Latin translation of the Bible that was the standard Bible in the western church for a thousand years, each verse begin with the word, “*beatus*,” which means “blessed.” (*or actually the plural form, beati*)

What is particularly striking about the beatitudes is the way that Jesus describes the blessed life in terms that are utterly contrary to what we often imagine blessing to be. Jesus begins by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”—or in a parallel passage in the gospel of Luke, which we heard last week, he simply says, “Blessed are the poor.” Instead of the rich being the ones who are blessed, Jesus says that the opposite is the case, and he describes in Matthew and Luke two distinct kinds of poverty. The “poor” are those who are materially low. The “poor in spirit” are those who are spiritually low—those who are feeling downcast and empty and weak. That can be worse than being materially poor. How can someone who is in the dumps—either materially or spiritually or both—be described as blessed?

The key is to understand the Biblical perspective on blessing—that real blessing is found not in having great stuff. Real blessing is found in having God. And it is those who are poor, poor in things or poor in spirit, who may become most keenly aware of their need for God and who thus are most likely to be receptive to the touch of God’s Spirit. Those who are well off, on the other hand, and more likely to feel self-sufficient and not so much in need of God.

This dynamic can be seen in almost every society, in the fact that there is generally an inverse relationship between the prosperity and comfort of a society and its spirituality. The more a society enjoys wealth and easy living, the less spiritual it becomes,

while societies with more poverty and difficulty are more spiritual. Thus in America only 20% of the population participates regularly in a church or any faith community, while the country with the highest rate of church attendance in the world is Nigeria—a country with its share of troubles. In the midst of tough times, people know they need God.

So as people in their material or spiritual poverty turn to God, what do they receive? Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit—or blessed are the poor—for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This does not mean that the poor will finally receive their pie in the sky in heaven. When Jesus used the phrase “kingdom of heaven,” he was not talking about the place where you go when you die, as though blessing comes to the poor only after they are dead. Rather the phrase Kingdom of heaven means the same thing as “Kingdom of God,” which Jesus talked about all the time. The kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, is the rule of God in human lives; it is the spiritual condition in which God reigns over the affairs of one’s life—a condition which can begin now and extend into all eternity. In short, the kingdom of heaven is the condition of blessing—a life that is truly in connection with God, a life sustained by God, guided by God, and abounding in God’s grace.

In all this it is clear that to be blessed is not so much to receive good things from God, although we do receive many benefits from God’s hand. Rather to be blessed is above all to receive God. God blesses us, in the greatest degree, not by giving us goodies but by giving us His Spirit, so that we know God’s mercy, God’s strength, God’s joy, and God’s peace.

All this can enable us as well to understand the Old Testament passage we heard this morning, which contained a refrain that we often find in the Psalms—“Bless the Lord, O my soul.” We may talk about how God blesses us, but people often wonder: how can we bless God? If blessing means to bestow goodies on another, then we cannot possibly bless God, since there is nothing we can bestow on God that God does not already have. But it all makes sense when we rightly understand blessing in terms of spiritual movement. God blesses us by pouring His love upon us; we bless God by responding spiritually in kind—we bless God by lifting our love to God and our praise to God.

If the first Beatitude says that the blessing of God comes especially to those who are feeling down in life, the same theme continues in the second beatitude, where Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” There was mourning this past week at our Annual Conference, as we took time to remember and pray for all those who are suffering in the aftermath of that terrible shooting in Orlando. But whenever we are considering such a horrible event, it can be difficult to see where there is blessing in the picture. How indeed can a time of deep mourning become an occasion of blessing?

Here again the same dynamic is at work that we saw in the first beatitude. A time of loss can be an occasion when we become especially aware of our need for God, and thus especially receptive to God. But when it comes to mourning, we can note three particular elements that are essential if a time of grief is to become truly a time of blessing.

First, we must be sure we are mourning the right thing. People can mourn for all sorts of reasons. People might mourn their losses at the casino, or mourn the condition of their lawn. People in Cleveland could mourn the fact that no major league sports team in the city has won a national title since 1964. Perhaps that will change tonight! If not, there will be great mourning in northern Ohio. When you think about it, a good deal of mourning that goes on in the world is rather self-centered and is focused on matters that are not of the utmost significance.

A contrary example can be found in Jesus. The gospels report two distinct occasions when Jesus mourned. Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus, as he was moved by the great pain that he saw in people; and during Holy Week, he mourned the spiritual condition, the obstinate sinfulness, of the people in Jerusalem. Notice how Jesus' mourning was directed outward—he was grieved by the sufferings and the sins that he observed in others. Thus Jesus gives us a picture of mourning rightly directed—where our sorrow is in response to the troubles of the world and the needs of others, and thus we join in the movement of God's compassion.

The second key element, if our mourning is to be an occasion of blessing, is that we turn in our mourning to God. Mourning is essentially hopeless if there is nothing to look to beyond the loss. But if we lift our eyes to God, we recognize that God can bring us to new life and promise, and thus we become receptive to the real comfort that comes from God.

Finally, mourning becomes an occasion of blessing when it spurs us to action. If we mourn discrimination or mourn poverty or mourn the hatred that we see in the world, and our mourning moves us to become instruments for change, then our grieving over the wrongs in the world has a positive result that we become agents of blessing for others. When you look at history, it has always been those who grieved over the sins of society who became finally instruments of transformation.

But here further the example of Jesus is quite instructive, when it comes to *how* we might become instruments of blessing. Often when we encounter troubles in people's lives, our tendency is to think that we somehow need to sail in now with the answer. But when Jesus encountered the death of Lazarus, his first response was to weep [*Jesus wept. John 11:35*]—to simply join with those who were mourning—and thus Paul would later write, “Weep with those who weep.” (Romans 12:15) If we want to be in ministry to those who are suffering loss or pain, the first thing to offer is not some sort of answer, but simply ourselves.

I recall the words of a woman who had lost her husband, and who a few months after his death made the remark, “In the depths of my grief, when people came to visit, I appreciated the ones with casseroles far more than the ones with bad theologies.” Simple expressions of care help the most.

Likewise when dealing with larger problems in society, people experienced in mission work will say that if we want to be truly helpful, then rather than trying to just sail in with “answers” it is crucial to personally connect with the people who are in tough

circumstances. This is why when our youth go on mission trips to a Native American reservation in Minnesota or to the Cumberland mountains in Tennessee, the objective is not simply to do something for the people but to connect in relationships with them.

This is exactly what Jesus does with us. As Christ reaches to us in our need, he may ultimately bring all sorts of answers, but what Christ brings first and foremost is the gracious touch of God's Spirit—the presence of God with us, to embrace us with mercy and to lead us anew in life. What is needed on our side is an openness to God, and this is precisely why the poor and the mourning are especially likely to be blessed. When we are in times of trial, it may seem that blessing is far away; yet if in our need we turn to God, then a time of spiritual poverty may become just the occasion when we experience God's presence in a new way, and are truly blessed, as we are drawn afresh into God's grace.