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January 29, 2017

Church of the Redeemer UMC

#Blessed

Before we start, let me send this tweet out real quick: “Hot coffee, happy kids, ready to worship! #blessed” If you’re on social media, how many posts like that do you see in a day? Just yesterday I did a quick search for #blessed on Twitter and Facebook, and thousands of posts came up—college acceptances, scholarships (it’s apparently football recruiting season), birthday tweets, and stylish selfies among them. One particularly #blessed guy gave thanks for his unexpected 20 piece chicken nugget from Chick Fil A. “Blessed” has become the shorthand for “look at the good things that are happening to me! I must be doing something right.” But we are called to critique this “blessed” culture—are these messages that Jesus preached and would preach to us today?

As we begin our miniseries on the Sermon on the Mount, let’s consider the blessings that Jesus gives as the disciples and others gather to hear him: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. These blessings are collectively called the beatitudes, the Latin root of which means “blessing” or “supreme blessing” (akin to when Catholics beatify a saint). I’m guessing, though, that I’m not the only one who has sat through a “be-attitude” Sunday school lesson at some point in my life that taught these blessings as prescriptive if/then statements. If you are meek, then you will inherit the earth. If you are a peacemaker, then you will be a child of God. It’s an understandable interpretation, given that our translations structure each blessing that way. However, there are a couple of problems with that interpretation.

First—what about the rest of us? I have been called many things in my life, several of which are not suitable to be repeated here. Not once have I ever been called meek...by someone who meant it. We may all mourn, but what about when we dance? And I long for peace on earth as much as the next person, but sometimes eternal peace does call us into conflict to overcome wrongdoing. What this all boils down to is, if the beatitudes are prescriptive statements about *who* is blessed then unfortunately a lot of us will be left out.

Which leads me to the second problem with this passage as prescription: throughout the New Testament, we read that Jesus and his disciples reached out to *everyone* with the promise of salvation. Jews, Gentiles, women with bad reputations, tax collectors, selfish children, adulterers, doubters,

betrayers, thieves—all found a blessing in Jesus. So it simply does not make sense that on this day, in this message considered so pivotal in the canon of our tradition, that Jesus would only bestow that blessing on a few who met some specific criteria. Not only does Jesus not leave us out, he also does not put any if/then conditions on his blessings; according to Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” It doesn’t make sense, then, to read the beatitudes this way.

If we accept that Jesus blesses all of us, then we have to rethink what it means to be blessed. Because for everybody who has received a raise or a promotion, someone else has just lost their job. For each couple who had the perfect date or who got married yesterday, another couple woke up angry with one another or broke up. Every illness that passed without incident can be countered with a positive test result. And of course, when the Cavs win a championship that means the Warriors have to lose. It’s great to rejoice over the many good things that happen in our lives. We absolutely should give thanks to God! But to point to those things as the proof that God has blessed us keeps us mired in a false vision of what God’s blessing really is. The good things do not point to us as blessed, and if you lack those things it is not because you are any less blessed by God. To believe otherwise is perhaps the most insidious symptom of the “prosperity gospel” mindset that we’ve talked about before, which sounds new but is actually as old as civilization itself.

Do we worship a God who is so small that she doles out good weather and traffic jams and promotions and disease like points on a cosmic behavior chart? No! Our God is bigger than all of that. As the people gather to hear Jesus,

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.¹

God’s blessing, indeed, often comes through raindrops and tears.²

We are, each of us here and all the souls who are and were and ever will be, blessed because God’s saving love came down in the person of Jesus Christ. With that blessing comes a great

¹ Taylor Burton-Edwards and Dawn Chesser, “After Epiphany: The Great Invitation” (UMC Discipleship Ministries, 2016), 49.

² Laura Story, “Blessings,” *Blessings* (Nashville: INO Records, 2011), audio CD.

responsibility, which is what we've talked about these last few weeks and is what we're reminded of in Micah 6:8: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. We are called to share that blessing with others through our Christ-centered work for a just, kind world. Dr. King spoke at great length about the need to follow Christ in deed as well as in prayer, including this passage from his sermon "The Answer to a Perplexing Question":

We must pray earnestly for peace, but we must also work vigorously for disarmament and the suspension of weapon testing. We must use our minds as rigorously to plan for peace as we have used them to plan for war. We must pray with unceasing passion for racial justice, but we must also use our minds to develop a program, organize ourselves into mass nonviolent action, and employ every resource of our bodies and souls to bring an end to racial injustice. We must pray unrelentingly for economic justice, but we must also work diligently to bring into being those social changes that make for a better distribution of wealth within our nation and in the undeveloped countries of the world.³

To faithfully spread God's blessing, we have to get our hands dirty.

I consider it a blessing that we have been born into a time such as this. If you want analyses of the previous week's work by the new administration, I can point you to some excellent resources. We do not need them, however, to observe the real damage that has already been done. Executive orders have reinstated the global gag rule, which will prevent thousands of women internationally from accessing healthcare; directed the beginning of construction of a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico; installed neo-Nazi Steve Bannon on the National Security Council and removed the Director of National Intelligence and the Chair of the Joint Chiefs from that council; and, of course, banned refugees and immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East. The last order has caused international mayhem in the last 24 hours: legal residents of the United States, including approved refugees and green card holders, have been detained at the border or prevented from boarding aircraft to come home. Google issued a blanket recall of its international staff in hopes of getting them home before the borders closed entirely. To this we can add the good news that a New York judge granted an injunction against the last order that will allow those legal residents to come home and halt the immediate deportation of affected individuals. Why a blessing, you ask? Because we have some big, obvious opportunities to speak Christ's truth into these places of darkness. We

³ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Answer to a Perplexing Question," *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 138-139.

have the chance to follow our prayers with our hands and feet to stand up for all of God's children as blessed.

This is where I remind you of my promise from back in July: this will be a safe place for all of God's children, but it will not be comfortable. We will speak about these things, and I will push you to follow Christ's movement as you speak and act out against them in your own lives. Otherwise, what is our purpose for being here?

Today we also reflect on some of the hard work that this church has done, starting 25 years ago and culminating in the vote to become a Reconciling congregation in November 1994. If you weren't here for that process, or time has dulled your memory of what transpired, Bishop Sally wrote a wonderful chronicle of the process as well as a brief retrospective in November 1996. I would be happy to get you a copy of it to read. One thing that stood out to me as I read it was the protests of some—not calling anyone out—that to be Reconciling wasn't necessary because we didn't need to make such an open and public statement about our position. We can welcome everybody without shouting about it, essentially. I believe, though, that Jesus would have us make such a clear statement—boldly speaking out for the sacred value and equal worth of God's non-hetero and non-binary children is exactly how we are called to be a blessing to others.

In fact, I believe that Jesus calls us out even further into this and other margins. It threatens to become a point of self-congratulatory pride that we are “the oldest Reconciling congregation in East Ohio” but how else are we actually showing Christ’s love to the LGBTQ community? How can we? Do we march, partner with the LGBT Community Center, sponsor and support LGBTQ youth who are homeless or at risk? Do we speak out against harmful legislation and for equal opportunities? Yes. All of the above. It’s no longer enough to “reconcile” any community, be it the LGBTQ community or the black community or the wider community of ethnic and racial minorities or refugees or documented immigrants or undocumented immigrants, to a center that prioritizes voices that do not share their experiences. If we are going to continue living into—and living up to—our Reconciling identity then we need to ditch our complacency, confront our various intersections of privilege, and take Christ’s love into the margins instead of waiting for the margins to come to us.

If Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount today, the opening would be closer to:

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...*ALL THESE PEOPLE* are #blessed.⁴

You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

Benediction

Now, I invite you to turn to your neighbor (if you're reading this from home, call someone!) and share a blessing. It can be specific or you can simply say, "You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you." For it is true of us all. Thanks be to God the Creator and our beloved Jesus, God's Beatitude—God's blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong."⁵

⁴ Burton-Edwards, 50.

⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People*, Kindle edition (Danvers, MA: Convergent Books, 2015), loc 2557.

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