

“Blessed”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
All Saints’ Day (Observed) – 30 October 2011
Matthew 5:1-12

You are blessed. You may not always feel blessed. Sometimes you may feel downright cursed. But you are blessed, even when you don’t feel that way, because being blessed isn’t about how you feel. Being blessed is about your relationship with Jesus and how that relationship changes who you are.

That’s pretty much the point of the Beatitudes, those opening verses from The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. All of the people declared blessed by Jesus were in distress. The poor in spirit, those in grief, those who hunger for justice, the meek, the merciful and the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted – anyone who endures one of those situations is unlikely to feel blessed. Take the peacemakers. In our competitive, violent world, who takes them seriously? People deride them as naïve, idealistic do-gooders. The pure in heart are often treated like freaks. When you’re grieving a loss, it hurts so bad that it takes an enormously strong faith to say, “Wow! I’m blessed!”

But this is exactly what Jesus is trying to convey. People of faith, people who reside in relationship with Jesus, can perceive and accept how God is blessing them, even in the most adverse circumstances. In fact, those challenging situations offer us opportunities to reach out for Jesus and be touched by him in ways that are more powerful, more meaningful than ordinary moments in our lives.

This truth finds most eloquent expression in a contemporary yet very accurate translation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson, a version simply called The Message. As I read his translation, please follow along in your NRSV scripture insert for the purpose of comparison.

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you (God). You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are – no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought. You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat. You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for. You’re blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family. You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom. Not only that – count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens – give a cheer, even! – for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

Peterson’s translation emphasizes that being blessed usually doesn’t involve a case of the warm- fuzzies. Instead, being blessed is about how our behavior places us in a particular relationship with God. When we encourage people to cooperate instead of engaging in cutthroat competition or outright fighting, we show forth the peace of Christ, and in that peace we discover who we are as people blessed by God. For being blessed is a sign of God’s approval, acceptance, and endorsement. Therefore, blessing is something that stays with us, even when life gets rough. Blessing remains constant among the tumult of our momentary emotions

Consider the poor in spirit, or as Peterson puts it those at the end of their rope. These are desperate people, folks close to rock bottom. In the usual translation, it says “theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” which makes us believe that the poor in spirit have to wait until they die for their heavenly reward, leaving the outlook for the here and now rather bleak. But it’s worth noting that in the gospels Jesus consistently referred to himself as the kingdom of heaven. He consistently referred to himself as the kingdom of God. His presence brings the Kingdom. So Peterson translated the phrase, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” as “With less of you there is more of God and of his rule.” In other words, when you are down and out, there’s a greater chance that the only thing left for you to hold on to is Jesus. What brings you low opens you up to connecting closer with the only person who can take you higher than you ever thought possible.

I saw this last October when several of us went to a school in Honduras called El Hogar. Most of the children there are orphans. They literally have nowhere to go. The school is their only home. The handful of kids who do have family come from such miserable poverty that malnutrition stunted their growth. Yet these children, caught in desperate circumstances, had found at El Hogar an oasis of nurture and education, and that oasis is fed from the spring of living water we call Jesus. Simply having enough to eat and getting a good education must have seemed like a miracle to them, but what enabled those kids to be cheerful, despite their rough backgrounds, was the presence of Jesus that pervaded that entire school, making it an outpost of God’s Kingdom.

Closer to home, I underwent an extended period of “poor in spirit,” a phase when I found myself “at the end of my rope.” I’m talking about the back problems I had earlier this year. As weeks turned into months, I began to wonder if I would ever get well enough to resume my

duties as a priest. This was immensely frightening. I thought that my fourteen years of service might be over, and this thought brought me very low.

While I was away, a number of things happened at Hickory Neck, events that were extremely important to me. Maria Kane was ordained to the priesthood. I missed a baptism and a wedding and the funerals of several people dear to me, people I have known since coming here nearly a decade ago. I mourned missing these precious, unrepeatable experiences. I did not feel blessed.

But looking back on it, I was blessed. By losing something very dear to me, I drew closer to God. Being confronted with the terrifying possibility that the privilege of serving as your priest and pastor might be lost to me permanently, I felt the embrace of God more closely than ever before, because I allowed God to hold me tighter. I simply had so much less to hold on to. And it was comforting. I grew in faith, because there was nothing else in the way. All of this was pure blessing, though I couldn't see it at the time.

Of course, it's easier to see that in hindsight, but better late than never, because what I learned over those months of pain and frustration is that God blesses me no matter what my situation. And I believe that what has been true for me can be true for anyone. Now I can carry that wisdom forward, so that when life gets tough again, I can be better aware of how I'm being blessed, even when I don't feel terribly blessed. And that knowledge gives me the strength and courage to be meek and merciful, to be the peacemaker, when every instinct of self-preservation urges me to avoid being meek and merciful and the peacemaker.

I suffer less anxiety and enjoy greater peace, because now I know that God blesses me, even when circumstances make me feel rotten. This knowledge has transformed me. And I pray that this spiritual transformation will continue, so that someday I will live each moment knowing

that being blessed is about my relationship with God, not about how I feel in any given moment. I never want to lose sight of the truth that God's blessing endures, no matter how I feel. Again, I believe that this can be true for each of us. We need not be defined by our emotions.

I hope this sheds some light on a beautiful but difficult passage from scripture. Let's face it. In the world we live in, the Beatitudes just don't make any sense. Only with the eyes of faith, only with the presence of Jesus, only in the Kingdom of God, do the Beatitudes make sense.

The point to remember is that you are blessed, especially when you don't feel blessed. When you don't feel blessed, you are in a situation where the grace of God can come into your life in a new and exciting way. When you do noble things, like being merciful or striving to make peace, don't expect the world to reward you. It won't. Instead, take your comfort in the love of God, who honors valiant sacrifices that help make the Kingdom of God, sacrifices that make presence of Jesus more fully alive to a world that desperately needs him. For you are blessed. Don't let anything make you think otherwise. Amen.