



Sunday, February 2, 2020

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Blessed Are You

All of which is comforting and affirming, but what does “Blessed” mean?

Clearly Blessed means someone gave you a Blessing. When we sneeze, the natural reaction is “God Bless You” because during the Middle Ages it was commonly accepted that when you sneezed the convulsion caused your heart to skip a beat, and in that instant your soul could be snatched from your body. Saying “God Bless You” was a lending of our-selves to care for the other in that moment. The Passing of the Peace originated not with shaking hands, fist bumps or rubbing elbows, but with a Christian Kiss. In the Roman Empire, when a person died, their spirit was to exit their mouth in their last breath. So a Slave was ordered to kneel by the bedside to take in the spirit of the departed with a kiss. Christians said, not only in death but also in life we have communion and peace.

In Matthew 5 the New English Bible uses the words “HAPPY ARE THEY”. Which works for Happy are the Merciful... Other Bibles translate Blessed as “Honored Are They” which may work for Honored are the pure in heart... but how happy or honored can you be to be meek, to be poor, to mourn?

When GPS devices in cars first came out, translations were often quite creative. There has been an upgrade in recent years. Now, whenever you make a wrong turn, your cell phone or device politely says “At the corner make a U-Turn.” Or as often happens here, we make an Arizona turn. But previously, when we did something unexpected the voice would announce “Re-Calculating”. True story, A couple rented a car to drive themselves around Europe, which was equipped with a GPS device. Driving this rented European vehicle, whenever the couple made a wrong turn, instead of saying “Re-Calculating” the GPS would announce “Blessed”. Personally, I really like that, because what “Being Blessed” means is “You are recognized and known” I am with You.

Reading the Sermon on the Mount, I always took the narrative literally, that Jesus went up to the mountain top like being on a pulpit and the people sat on the mountainside beneath him. But what Matthew seems to have been trying to express, was that exactly like “Moses went up the Mountain to receive the Law” from God, Jesus went up the mountain to preach. “Going up the mountain” is description of entering a different reality, a holy place spiritually, preaching the Word of the Lord.

When touring beside the Sea of Galilee the Rabbi leading us described his own reversal on this sermon, based on Geography. The Mount of the Beatitudes is a concave hillside going down to the water’s edge. Now while it would be a precarious place to stand, it would have been possible for Jesus to have climbed the mountain to preach over the people; but if you stood at the shore with the people seated on the face of the mountain, the mountain like a Bandshell forming a natural amplification. What if like John the Baptist, all the crowds of Galilee had come to hear Jesus, he had directed them to be comfortable on the hillside, and as he preached more and more people came forcing Jesus to back up into the water.

And the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus preaching from Peter's boat were actually part of the same event, recorded separately by the Gospel writers?

Part of the difficulty of the Sermon on the Mount is the many different parts, so this morning we are only discussing the Beatitudes, the first 12 verses of the 110 verses in these 3 Chapters. But even in the Beatitudes, there is first introduction regarding the crowds following Jesus and his sitting down to teach his disciples. Then there are 4 Blessings that are Reversals, and 4 Blessings that are Commendations, then a Challenge. When Matthew says the Disciples was that was the four: Peter, Andrew, James, John; or the 12; or the thousands in the crowds, the Bible does not specify.

Jesus begins by identifying the needs of the crowd and his Assurances are Reversals of future Reality. Instead of "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" or "Mr. Chief Justice, Majority Leader, Minority Leader, Members of the Senate", or as in the State of the Union "My Fellow Americans..." Jesus identifies and thereby identifies with who is in the crowd. You who are Poor in Spirit, Who Mourn who are Meek...

Those who are Poor in Spirit, the Greek word for poor is "*anawim*" literally meaning the dispossessed, the abandoned, Poor in Spirit then means those who have given up hope in the fairness of the world. These are people who know their lives are not in their own control, they are utterly dependent upon God for life and death. Jesus' promise is not a future possession of the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to you, but rather You are already living Dependent upon Heaven.

Those who Mourn are those who miserable, unhappy living. If the poor have no reason for hope in this life, those who mourn have no reason for joy. Jesus' assurance is that we will be comforted by being whole by being in the presence of God. These are people who yearn for that which is unattainable in this life, to be with God, and when Heaven and Earth are one, they will be satisfied.

The positive form of Meek is to be gentle, humble, non-aggressive; but the negative form is powerless, humiliated, those who are stepped upon in life. We all know the story of Sir Walter Raleigh who laid his coat on the ground for the Queen to walk upon, the Meek are those who did not have a coat to take off and are forced to lay face down in the mud for others to step on. In a Caste system, not only is there distinction between Royalty and Commoner, Landowners had a right to Speak and Vote, to be heard, the Meek were treated as Alien, Foreigners in a Foreign land. Jesus' assurance is that you will inherit all Creation.

To Hunger and Thirst assumes you have been denied, deprived, for whom it is not dinner time because it is 6pm... you Hunger and Thirst because you have not been given anything for as long as you can recall. And what is it that they hunger and thirst for? Justice, Righteousness, for Vindication before God. What Jesus describes in the first four is not a spiritual practice that to be Christians we must first recognize the Unfairness of the world, our Mourning and Humiliation. Instead, Jesus is offering promise that none of these circumstances will exist in the Kingdom of God.

There is a shift at Verse 7, instead of identifying present circumstance and offering the Blessing that things will change; Jesus identifies those who are bringing blessings to others and blesses these. Blessed are the Merciful: Concrete Acts of Charity, Kindness, Mercy, Forgiveness and Healing.

To be Pure in Heart is not simply to avoid impure thought, but identifies being single-minded devotion to God. Purity of Heart is part of the reason for a Monotheistic faith, we are divided in our loyalties, serving competing purposes, but wholly committed to God.

Peacemakers are those who seek the Shalom of healing a broken world. Peacemaking is not a passive attitude, but positive actions for reconciliation. Roman Peace, the Pax Romana was an enforced peace, that assured safety, security, prosperity for the Roman Senate by military control of the masses. Christian Peace in contrast arises from justice, tolerance, true reconciliation with one another/the world.

Up until this point, the Disciples are Followers, Jesus Called and they left what they were doing to listen. Jesus identified this group and those and them, when suddenly Jesus spoke to YOU. Why would you be persecuted and reviled and lied about? Because challenging the status quo, changing relationships and expectations is threatening to people and systems and power.