

BLESSED!

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

LHUMC 2/9/14

Beatitudes Series #1 (Overview)

I. Introduction

A. So...are you feeling particularly “blessed” this morning? How you answer that question will probably depend on a couple of things:

1. First and most obviously, what’s going on in your life.
 - a) There can be big things that have happened to you, good or bad, that will affect how you answer that question.
 - b) Big things like births or deaths or conflicts or new and improved relationships or joys or concerns about your health—things like that.
 - c) Or maybe smaller things like a vacation that you are about to take (anyone who might be heading south in the next few weeks I would consider to be particularly blessed!)
 - d) Or some little good or bad thing that might have happened to you even already this morning that affects how you might answer that question (my own example of losing my car keys in a snow bank)
 - e) Alyce McKenzie’s story of being in line at the grocery store. When the clerk said to the woman ahead of her, “Have a nice day!”, the woman answered, “I’m sorry, but I have other plans!” There was someone who wasn’t feeling particularly blessed at that moment, and we all have days like that.
2. How you define that word.
 - a) And that can be a problem, at least for us as followers of the one who came up with what we’ve heard and sung this morning. You hear Jesus’ beatitudes again, and if you are like me, you get a sneaking suspicion that he defines what it means to be blessed much differently than our world does.
 - b) As I pondered that reality this week, I realized that if our culture were to write a list of beatitudes for us to go by they might sound something like this:
 - 1) Blessed are those with lots of money in the bank, for they shall be free of worry.
 - 2) Blessed are those who keep looking over their shoulder, for nobody will ever get a jump on them up the ladder of success.

- 3) Blessed are those who know the right people, for they will always get the job.
 - 4) Blessed are those who live in the right neighborhoods, for their property values will always increase. (and so on...you could probably come up with your own list, based on your own experiences of “cultural blessedness”)
 - c) Obviously, those are a little different than “blessed are the poor in spirit” and “blessed are those who mourn” and all the rest. But more on that in a minute.
3. I read the beatitudes again and I also realize that we tend to toss that word “blessed” around a little too casually sometimes—that Jesus has a deeper agenda than we do sometimes. That if you take the beatitudes at face value, it can be kind of a loaded thing to wish blessings on someone.
- a) We say on answering machines or on our voice mail header “have a blessed day”. To go by Jesus’ definition, does that mean we want whoever hears that to be poor in spirit or persecuted?
 - b) We say “bless you” to someone who sneezes—did you know that that practice goes back to the middle ages when to sneeze meant that you might have the plague? So when they said “bless you” to someone who sneezed, it was serious business.
 - c) So if nothing else, the beatitudes remind us that when we bless someone else, or even more than that when God promises to bless us, it is indeed serious business!

II. So as we begin this journey through Jesus’ very different kind of beatitudes and their suggestion of a very different definition of what it means and what it looks like to be blessed, what do we make of all of this? What is the big picture when it comes to not just understanding the Beatitudes, but figuring out how to answer that question of whether we are blessed or not? What understandings can we take with us as we begin this journey over the next few weeks of looking at each of them individually? Three things come to mind:

- A. They are not rules to live by.
 - 1. Jesus always understood that folks didn’t need more rules, beyond the hundreds and hundreds that are already there in the Old Testament.
 - 2. Or to put it a little differently, these are not prescriptions (prescribed behaviors of how we are supposed to behave), they are descriptions of how life sometimes can be.

- a) We can try really hard to follow the rules, and we will still have times when we feel poor in spirit, when we mourn, when we are persecuted and insulted.
 3. The problem with treating them like rules to live by is that we begin to think that we have to work really hard to be “blessed” by God.
 4. When we do that, we lose sight of the fact that God loves us and blesses us unconditionally and that there is nothing we can do to earn God’s blessings, that before we were even born, we were blessed.
 5. David Lose: “We’re so used to paying for our mistakes, paving our own way, toeing the line and reaping the consequences when we don’t, and so it may not only be unexpected, but downright unsettling and nearly inconceivable to imagine that God behaves differently, showering us with blessings apart from anything we have done, earned, or deserve.” (www.workingpreacher.org, 1/23/11)
 6. So you could say that the Beatitudes give us another example of how God behaves differently than we do.
 7. And that Jesus is not setting up conditions of blessing, he is just blessing us.
 8. Once we figure that out, it allows to read and hear the Beatitudes in a completely different light.
- B. The Beatitudes are another example of Jesus presenting to us an upside-down world.
1. Barbara Brown Taylor has said that Jesus should have asked the crowd at the Sermon on the Mount to stand on their heads before he started and that the Beatitudes could all be summed up by one that says “Blessed are the upside-down”
 2. It’s pretty natural to hear the Beatitudes—about how those who God blesses are those who mourn and those who are poor in spirit and hungry and thirsty and to think to yourself “If that’s what it takes to be blessed, who wants to be blessed?”
 3. Even the so-called “positive” ones about being peacemakers and being merciful can be problematic—if you’ve ever tried to be those things, you know that it may not win you any popularity contests.
 4. This whole issue will be the “elephant in the room (or sanctuary)” over the next few weeks, as Jesus turns the definition of what it means to be blessed on its head, at least in terms of what we’ve considered that to mean in worldly terms.

5. And for all of us who have gotten pretty used to seeing the world “right-side-up” and are pretty comfortable with that view, the question becomes whether we see the Beatitudes as a comfort or a threat.
 6. And when you take into account the fact that the word we usually translate as “blessed” more accurately means “those whom God favors”, that makes that question even more real for us.
 7. As one commentator says, this is another time when whether we see what Jesus is saying as good news or bad news has a lot to do with where we are standing when we get the news.
 8. Kurt Vonnegut once commented that it was interesting that amidst the great clamor that often arises by those who want to post the Ten Commandments, he could recall never hearing of anyone wanting to post the Beatitudes in a public place. Perhaps the discomfort we feel in their upside-down nature is the reason why.
- C. And then most of all, what will become clear over the next few weeks is that these Beatitudes give us a glimpse of the Kingdom of God in all of its glory.
1. And it is both an “already” and “not yet” view of Kingdom
 2. Have you noticed that the Beatitudes each contain the word “are” in the first half, and “will” in the second half? “Are” being a present tense word, “will” a future tense word.
 - a) And so what comes after the “will” (they “will be comforted”, they “will be called the children of God”, they “will see God”) gives us a glimpse of the future glory of the Kingdom—a place of justice and equality and peace that God has promised each of us.
 - b) But before that comes the “are”—and what comes after the “are” (those who are meek and poor and hungry) gives us a glimpse of the present Kingdom, a place that is far removed from the future Kingdom.
 - 1) As I once heard it said, the present Kingdom is not like the Magical Kingdom at Disney World, it’s not a place where it’s always sunny and warm and a fun place to be.
 - 2) It is a place where people hurt and get trampled and persecuted and all the rest, a place where sometimes those people are us.

3. And so in the weeks to come, we will talk about how the Beatitudes offer us this reality gap between “the way things are” and “the way things will be”.
4. And we will see in each of them, how the love and grace of God is the only thing that can bridge that gap. That that is both the present reality and the future promise of the Beatitudes.

III. Conclusion

- A. So today we begin this journey from the present Kingdom to the future Kingdom.
- B. You will be glad to know that I’m not planning to make you stand on your head each week during the service to get the full effect of the Beatitudes.
- C. But one thing I do want you to do this morning to start the journey is take a moment to turn to the person on either side of you and say “you are blessed”.
- D. Be aware that that person you just reminded of that fact that they are blessed may be someone who answered that question a few minutes ago whether they would consider themselves to be blessed with a resounding “no” Because we all have times like that, and maybe for that person, today is one of those times.
- E. But as we will see again and again in the coming weeks, it is precisely at those times when we are most blessed by God—blessed by God’s love, God’s care, God’s grace.
- F. Blessed by a God who promises us a future reality where we will be filled, we will receive mercy, we will be His children.

