



“Blessed”

a sermon by

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Our reading this first full week of Lent comes to us from the gospel of Matthew 4:23-5:12. It is Jesus' sermon on the mount, otherwise known as the Beatitudes. Our ears become so accustomed to hearing Christ's recitation of 'blesseds', but this message is at the core of his life and teaching and, in fact, stands at the very heart of the Lenten season that is dedicated to the pathway to the cross in many ways. So let us be challenged to listen for the ways the living and active Spirit is teaching us in a new way. Our reading begins with a little stage setting- beginning in Matthew 4:23 and following.

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Of course the crowds brought their sick to Jesus- the leprous, the demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics. All those poor souls who were so sick and so vulnerable. He was a miracle worker- healing in the towns in a way that no one had ever done. Restoring sight to the blind and sanity to the half-crazed. Giving the opportunity for new life and new hope to those whose illness had driven them into poverty or isolation or marked them with the heavy sign of social stigma. These were heavy burdens that fell before Jesus and so the people flocked to him. Bringing loved ones and friends, and their own broken selves. Bless their hearts. One would have to take pity on them- and he did. He took pity and healed them because there was absolutely nothing that they could do for themselves to make their lives right in the eyes of the culture. And so when Jesus saw the crowds he took a step back and up the mountainside with his disciples- and Matthew gives his readers a little narrative breather- allowing us to first feel the crowds pushing in ourselves, with their oozing skin and their desperate eyes, and feeling the relief of a bit of space- an elevated status reserved for the really important teaching in his gospel- so that we might be more receptive to hearing what Jesus might have to say. Like a second Moses, Jesus is on the mount prepared to deliver God's truth.

No doubt the disciples had a heavy heart after seeing all those sad stories- they would have had elation to be sure, because they were being healed, but heavy hearts because the droves kept coming. It is a big world, there is so much need. All this brokenness and suffering, how would all of their lives ever be good again? Jesus can't possibly touch them all. But then Jesus delivers his word. Opens his mouth and offers an unexpected and stirring commentary. He says, 'blessed.' Blessed. Blessed are the poor in spirit. The meek. Those who mourn. The

persecuted, the peacekeepers. Not exactly the power players of their day. These are the folks who can't do a thing for themselves. Much more like all of those in the throng who came for healing rather than anyone who they would have identified as carrying the mark of God's blessing. The Hebrews up to that point had lived into their own health and wealth gospel. According to that rule, many cattle and an abundance of children were the sign that God's favor was upon you, but sickness and death meant just the opposite. But now Jesus says blessed...are the poor. Blessed are they who mourn. Not those with strength, but blessed are the meek- for they shall inherit the earth...

I hate to tell you this, but you and I are practically genetically predispositioned not to understand this teaching of Jesus that is not only at the heart of Matthew's gospel, but is the flesh and soul of this season that we call Lent. Where the liturgical calendar asks us to follow that long road to Calvary, and forces us to just stand in the shadow of the cross for a time. It is that uncomfortable season where we are asked to take a hard look within ourselves and deal honestly with what we see. And, to be honest, we're just not really that good at it. We can test ourselves on this notion that we have some sort of innate or cultural disadvantage to really getting this gospel message. Which phrase is more comfortable to you: "Blessed are the meek", or "survival of the fittest"? "Blessed are the poor", or "He who dies with the most toys wins"? "Blessed are those who mourn," or, "Keep your chin up?" "Blessed are the pure in heart", or "Watch your back?" The hardened exterior of our culture lays itself layer upon layer over our souls like a shield of armor. It builds us up with the belief that we can control our fate and choose our destiny. It blinds us to the idea that any of us might be subordinate to a higher power- be it the power of systemic oppression that keeps others down or the power of God who directs our every step. If we're being honest, it is an armor of control that we place on our back and over our hearts each and every day, and the myth that our abilities can direct our health and wealth that we digest as our gospel message when we return home satisfied after a hard day's work at night. Anything that will protect us from the great sin of our culture and of our time. Vulnerability. Vulnerability to the elements, to disease, to poverty or despair- vulnerability to others or ourselves- we are a country built on strength and determination- there isn't much room for anything else.

But listen to what Jesus says. Because Jesus is talking about Lent. He is talking about the kingdom of God. He's talking about you and about me. And he says, 'blessed.' Blessed are the vulnerable. Like all those people who came forward for healing, blessed are those who are vulnerable- whose hearts are laid open before God out of grief, or love, or fear, or sincerity, or earnest hope. Blessed are they. For theirs is the kingdom of God. There is something about that posture of openness before God because we can do no other that evokes the blessing. Perhaps it is because, when the layers of armor are pulled back and our hearts exposed for all to see, only then can we begin the journey toward a life of authentic engagement with ourselves and with our God and one another. Perhaps because, only when we get down into the real stuff of life- *all* of the real stuff of life, mourning and meekness included- then can we plumb the depth of joy offered to us by the resurrection. Perhaps the blessing comes when we realize that our life is not in our hands because only then do we place it in his. But instead of allowing room for brokenness and vulnerability and honesty and surrender, we pile on the protective layers. And somehow expect to understand the power of redemption without first truly experiencing the power of that within us which needs so desperately to be redeemed.

A friend of mine shared with me the story of a professor of hers who stood in line at the gift shop of something like a *Discovery Place*. While she waited she noticed that on the counter was a bucket filled with small silver stones with tiny words printed on them. She grabbed a handful and read them- one said 'joy', another, 'peace.' One said 'hope' and still another 'laughter.' But she frowned when she noticed that on almost all of the other stones in her hand and on the vast majority of the ample amount left in the bucket there were much more discouraging words- 'sorrow' and 'fear.' 'Anger' and 'doubt' and 'tears' were among them. It would seem that everyone in the gift shop had taken all the more pleasant words and left all of the more troubling ones behind, and who could blame them? The woman began to search her mind for someone who could perhaps use the messages on these small stones and immediately thought of a friend who had recently suffered the death of her husband and was finally beginning to come out from under the veil of radical grief. So the woman began her own search through the stones- sifting through the 'doubts' and 'fears' in search of all the 'happiness' and 'hopes' she could find. There were just so many of the other though. They seemed almost ridiculous to ignore and yet she really didn't want any of them. Finally, out of resignation more than anything else, she accepted the mere four or five more uplifting words she could find, and grabbed just a few of the others for good measure and sent them off that day with mixed emotions. A few days later her phone rang- on the other line was her friend, who was in tears. 'I just received your gift,' she explained, as the professor wondered if their friendship was still intact. 'And I wanted to thank you- I can't tell you what it meant to me to receive these little stones. I didn't want the sorrow and the anger that you sent, but I realized that without those I never would have received the gift of the peace, or the comfort. If I hadn't faced the fear I never would have known the hope. This is the best gift anyone has ever given to me and I am sitting here and counting them all as my blessings.'

Lent invites us not to gloss over the pathway to the cross, but to engage deeply with our brokenness and our fear, with the depths of our depravity and the breadth of our need that we might share in the suffering of our Lord and experience the true power of redemption therein. For Easter is not just about feasts and bunnies, but about the celebration of that which we could not begin to accomplish on our own. The redemption of our brokenness that would call us blessed. And the resurrection that would save our souls. Amen.