

Kingdom 101: Blessed

Matthew 5: 1-12

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.

There is a provocative photograph hanging in an executive director’s office who works with street gangs. It is of the back of a shirtless Latino *hermano* whose entire backside exhibits scars. Some are from his life on the street. Others are older from an abusive childhood. Inked over the scar tissue is the tattoo of a seven-letter word: “Blessed.” It is hard to imagine someone bearing such scars would be blessed, but it’s the word Jesus uses nine times to describe those who are blessed according to the terms of God’s kingdom. The poor and meek. The mourning and merciful. The justice seekers and peacemakers. The persecuted and the scarred.

At first glance, it doesn’t seem possible. It runs in the opposite direction of how our world operates. Blessed are the meek? The sensitive and gentile ones? Today, as we sit down to watch the Super Bowl, with our seven-layer dip and buffalo wings, we can be pretty confident the coaches giving their pep talks in the locker rooms aren’t saying, “Now go out there today and be meek!” Could you imagine a military general telling their soldiers to be meek? Or a politician who runs on the platform of being meek? Of course not! It’s not how the world works. Even in church Jesus’ list might seem a bit farfetched. Blessed are the spiritually destitute? You know, those who wonder if God exists at all. The “nones”—N-O-N-E-S—who say church doesn’t work for them. We tend to think of blessed people as spiritually buoyant, whose prayers are answered. Those who wear their faith on their sleeve. Then we hear Jesus affirming the peacemakers. Is it just me or are our churches historically more comfortable with keeping the peace rather than making it? But Jesus says blessed are the makers and shakers and agitators for peace. The Beatitudes seem to run the opposite direction of our experience? Certainly in the world. Maybe even in the church.

But pay attention to what Jesus is doing. He begins his sermon the way every preacher should start their sermons: with a blessing. Not only for his people, but especially for those who the world forgets. These days the blessing might sound something like:

Blessed are the ones no one else notices: the overnight janitors buffing hallway floors, the kids who and get kicked around the system, the people who fall through the cracks, for they are noticed by God.

Blessed are the children who sit alone at lunch tables and are chosen last when choosing teams on the playground. Blessed is the teenager who becomes mocked on social media and just wants to be loved like everyone else. For they are the ones who God chooses first.

Blessed are the undocumented and their pro bono lawyers, the overworked social worker and the underpaid teacher, the parent who is doing everything she can to help her child escape the cycle of poverty she is trapped in. For God will provide them with strength beyond riches.

Blessed is the kiddo who double dips during communion to get extra grape juice, or the elder who sits next to a parent to help engage their squirmy kid, or the child who draws a picture of their church with a Black Lives Matter sign on it, for they simply get it.

Blessed are the ones with Alzheimer's and their caregivers, for God remembers them.
Blessed are those who are in the closets, for the doors shall be flung open.
Blessed are those who dare to hold a stranger's hand as they weep, for theirs is like the presence of God.
We could go on and on.

Jesus' first word is to pour out blessings on those who live on the underbelly of life, and he blesses those who are willing to be in solidarity with them.

So now wonder: what if the church blessed like Jesus does? The world would be turned on its head, wouldn't it? A pastor friend recently shared his grievance over a homeless man who was hit by a car and killed. Every day, walking through downtown, he would see his homeless friend who would call out to him by name, "Pastor Brian!" After catching up, or grabbing a cup of coffee, they would do a secret handshake that the homeless man taught him. We might call it a "kingdom handshake." It was a blessing that returned both of them to themselves, because that is what a blessing does: it returns someone to themselves and in the process we are returned to ourselves as well. And for a moment, the blessing turns the world on its head.

You see, it has always been about blessing. From creation's conception, to God using Israel to be a blessing for all nations, to the table of the bread and cup. God's first and final word is always blessing. Once read a story about a woman whose father was in Hospice. As her and her spouse sat with him, her spouse stood up, went over, grabbed the dying man's hand, and then whispered something into his ear. Then she saw her father turn his head, mouthing words with

his eyes closed. After the moment passed, her spouse let go of the man's hand and went back to the chair. Curious, she asked, "What did you say to my dad?" Her spouse replied, "I asked him to bless me." It has always been about blessing. From beginning to end. Especially for those who the world too easily forgets.

So perhaps this week you will have the opportunity to bless someone with a version of a kingdom handshake. And soon we discover ourselves becoming what we always have been: a blessing to the world. And perhaps for a moment you can feel it: the world turning on its head.