

## Upside-Down Blessing

### *Matthew 5: 1-12*

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And 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 the sake of righteousness, 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.

Imagine being there as Jesus preaches his first sermon. We wonder what he is going to say. We wonder what nuggets we can glean from his teaching. And then for his intro he begins with something like this:

Blessed are the ones no one notices: the isolated elderly and those who are immune compromised during a pandemic, the kids who get kicked around the system, the people who fall through the cracks, for they are the ones noticed by God.

Blessed are the children who sit alone at lunch tables and are chosen last on the playground. Blessed is the teenager who is mocked on social media, or the transgender child who just wants to be accepted and loved. For they are the ones God chooses first.

Blessed are the undocumented immigrants and the families they leave behind, the minimum wage worker, and the parent who works three jobs to put food on the table. For God will provide them with strength beyond riches.

Blessed are those with dementia and Alzheimer's for God won't ever forget them.

Blessed are those who are in the closets, for the doors shall be flung open.

Blessed are those who can put a victim and a victimizer in a healing space, for they have embodied the mercy of the gospel.

We could go on and on.

Jesus' first word is an empowering blessing on those whose lives are in hard places. How are we to hear the Beatitudes?

At first glance, honestly, it doesn't make much sense. It's not how our world operates. Blessed are the meek? The sensitive and gentle ones? Today, as we sit down to watch football, we can be pretty certain that as the coaches give their pregame pep talks, they aren't saying, "Now go out there and be meek!" It's not how it works. Or read in the paper the story of a mother's grief after

she has had to say goodbye to her twelve-year-old daughter after a meaningless drive by shooting on the east side of town. We weep over the human wreckage. Blessed are the mourning? I'm sorry but no. It's not how the world works.

Even in church Jesus' list might seem a bit farfetched. Blessed are the spiritually destitute? You know, the ones whose life has been so full of pain they wonder if God exists at all. We tend to think of blessed people as spiritually buoyant, not those who are spiritually bankrupt. It's not how it works. Then we hear Jesus affirming peacemakers. Except, historically speaking, the church has been more comfortable with keeping the peace than with making it. The blessings Jesus begins with, they contradict our experience, don't they? Certainly in the world. Perhaps even in the church.

Except, when we listen deeper, the teaching flips our understanding of who is blessed on its head. You see, until we hear this teaching, we might think that we are blessed with things in order to share them with others who don't have what we have. Right? It is what the law of Moses asks God's people to do: to share their blessings. It's what Abraham was asked to create: a people who are a blessing for all nations. It's what we sing in our doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow—from God, through God's people, to those who are underserved.

Except! Except, notice which direction the blessing flows. It trickles downward. So here's my question: how are blessings any different than trickle-down economics? You know where the prosperous fill their buckets until they overflow to those with empty buckets underneath. How is it any different? Answer: It's not.

So what if Jesus is saying that God's blessing doesn't trickle down? Instead in God's kingdom the blessing trickles up! What if he is saying that the kingdom of God doesn't move from the top down, but from the bottom up. And now it is the marginalized, and the oppressed whose buckets are filled and unless we are in community with the poor and with the oppressed and in the hard places in life we are going to be missing out. Until we hear this teaching we think blessing trickles down, but it doesn't...it trickles up!

So, if it's true, what does it mean for us? Maybe it means that if the church is to be the church, we must be in community with the spiritually depraved and the suffering. With the mourning and the oppressed. Notice how Jesus organizes his blessings. The first four are for those in difficult places. But the last four—the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who withstand persecution and insults in Christ's name—they are the blessings for those who use their advantages for the sake of the poor and the oppressed. And all the blessings hinge on the blessing which is in the middle: God's mercy and loving kindness which connects us all.

In Asheville there is a church with a soup kitchen. The first rule there is that every volunteer can eventually serve the homeless, but only *after they are served by the homeless first*. Why? Because to bless the poor, we have to be willing to be blessed by the poor. Blessing is never a one-way transaction. If we think it is, then the farthest we can go is trickle down charity. But if we empower the poor, work with the underserved, and become students of their experience, perhaps then justice can truly be achieved. Justice is relational. Jesus' sermon begins by flipping things on its head and is about us blessing each other. It's why being with Dellabrook, and being

part of the broad-based organizing effort, and being a diverse community who centers others is so important. The teaching turns our understanding of blessing on its head, and we begin to realize that it isn't Jesus' world that operates upside down, it's ours.

We are a blessed church. Not primarily because of what we have, but because of who we have among us. Different ages and genders, orientations and gifts, cultures and languages. You bless us far more than you know. You help us to remain close to the kingdom of God.

So this week—originally I was going to ask you to go and bless someone and then next week during Time with Disciples you could share your stories—but instead, maybe we bless someone primarily paying attention to the blessing we receive through them. The blessing works both ways—and it doesn't primarily trickle down, it trickles up. And when it does, perhaps we see it: the world being turned on its head and the kingdom of God being close at hand. And is there any blessing richer than that? Amen.