

A Legacy of Giving

This sermon was preached by Pastor Heather Wigdahl on Sunday, October 30, 2011 at Trinity Lutheran Church.

Our gospel reading contains the well-known words of Jesus, often called the Beatitudes--or declarations of blessedness. In the Beatitudes, Jesus turns our worldly perceptions of "blessedness" on its head, showing us that true blessedness comes in being connected to God, and to one another.

Luke 6:20-26

Then JESUS looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, Grace to you and peace, in the name of our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Today we conclude our series: “Saints Alive: Living Generously.” We have talked about generous living, well beyond just the ways we spend our money; we have talked about giving, ourselves, our time, our treasures; we have reflected on the people that have shaped us, too, to be generous people.

And today we close with a focus on our own legacy—what we leave behind, what our gifts to the world, to one another, will be.

In our gospel, Jesus speaks of “blessings.” And oddly, he names those who we wouldn’t tend to think of as such: the poor, the hungry, the sad, the scorned? Really?? I’m a bit confused! What does it mean to be blessed? How would *you* answer that question?

In our gospel, Jesus is teaching, actually, on a plain—on level ground. A few verses earlier we are told that he has come down, physically, from *higher* ground—to be eye to eye with the people. Metaphorically, such is what he calls his disciples to do, too: to be willing to lower ourselves—and get their hands dirty—with the real life suffering and needs of others. And that’s when Blessings *happen*, Jesus says: when those who **have**, give; when those who **can**, do. BOTH sides of the exchange end up experiencing blessings.

It’s important to note, that the gospel of Luke, more than any of the other gospels, speaks of issues surrounding wealth. The basic message of Jesus' ministry in Luke's gospel centers around the theme of good news to the poor, but the conversation is addressed primarily to the rich. Luke is addressing Christians who would be considered well-to-do in his day.

And Luke shows us the heart of Jesus, who connects the fate of groups, *usually* on opposite ends of the spectrum: the poor and the rich, the hungry and full, the sad and the happy, the scorned and the popular. In faith, as followers of Jesus, our fate, our wellbeing, is shared. Connected.

Now, throughout history, wealth, ownership, health, prosperity—*these* have been understood as blessings; and even *more significantly*, from a theological perspective, they've been seen as BLESSINGS FROM GOD.

What does it mean to hear Jesus challenge our assumptions of such things. What does it mean to be “blessed?” in light of our Lord, savior, king, so different than any of the other powers that be in our world?

Jesus challenges our assumptions, then and now. His audience on the plain must have been shocked by his words. Here are some of the assumptions he challenged *then*. The Greek word for “blessing”, *makarios*, for the ancient Greeks, well before Jesus day, for the ancient Greeks, *makarios* referred to the gods.

“Gods” were the blessed ones. They had achieved a state of happiness and contentment *beyond* all cares, labors, even death. The blessed ones were *beings* who lived way up there in some other world. To be blessed, you had to be a god. (*which would leave most of out, right?*)

Eventually, that word took on a second meaning. It referred to the “dead”. The blessed ones were humans, who, through *death*, had reached the other world of the gods. They too, were now beyond the cares of earthly life. To be blessed, you had to be dead.

Finally, the word *markarios* around the century when Jesus lived and the gospels were written, came to refer to the elite, the upper crust of society. It referred to people whose riches and power put them above the normal cares and worries of life. To be blessed, you had to be very rich and powerful.

In all of these meanings, the “blessed” ones existed *on a higher plane* than the rest of the people. They were gods. They were humans who had gone to that other world of the gods. They were the wealthy, upper crust.

But *Jesus* uses this word in a NEW way, as I remind you, Luke has him coming DOWN to the level—to the plain. It is not the **elite** who are blessed. It is not the **rich** and powerful who are blessed. It is not the **high** and mighty who are blessed. It is not the people living in **huge** mansions or expensive penthouses who are blessed.

Rather, Jesus pronounces God's blessings on the lowly: the poor, the hungry, the crying, the hated. Jesus turns the idea of blessing upside-down. Why? Why are these lowly *blessed*? What could possibly be seen as “blessing” in their lives?

Look at verse 20 with me: “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*” Another way of saying this is: “*blessed are you for God rules over you.*” The good news to the poor is that those who have little, rely more easily on God; those who have little are able to see their ultimate dependence ON God.

It's true, isn't it? The more "secure" we feel, the more independent and self-sufficient we believe we are. *God can become an afterthought.* Our need for one another can be overlooked, too.

But Jesus gives us new eyes to see what it really *means* to be blessed. For house, land, boat, cabin, clothes, toys, *you fill in the blank*...these things are nice, but in the end, they alone cannot fully satisfy...right? WE know it's true, the moment we lose something or someone that really matters. And all the stuff we call "blessings" can actually become a curse: if they're gained by sacrificing things that matter more: love, honor, compassion. Family, friends, neighbors.

Luke *doesn't say* that to be a Christian, we must abandon all our possessions, rather he says we must choose whom we will serve. Possessions aren't evil—but their worth is measured by how they're used.

When used in *service*, blessings come: for those who give, AND for those to receive. That's what happened, in the early church. Gifts were connected with needs. That's what happens in our modern day church, too: gifts are given, for the benefit of all. And blessings abound, for those who give and receive.

Jesus says: "Woe to you," if you miss out on that truth; *woe to you*, if you lose sight of all the opportunities God places before you: for abundant life shared; abundant life, in service; abundant life, through *building* and *creating*, and blessing others.

Jesus reminds us: Don't miss moments of making connections; of feeling compassion; of acting out grace—for such is the kingdom of God; for such is the fullness of life.

There was a book that came out, I think in 2002, called: *Authentic Happiness*. I found it compelling. The author, a psychologist, named three important components to happiness:

- 1) pleasure (what he called "the smiley-face piece"),
- 2) engagement (the depth of involvement with one's family, work, hobbies) and
- 3) meaning (using personal strengths to serve some larger end).

Of those three roads to a happy, satisfied life—*pleasure*, he says is the least consequential. He insists that THIS is of utmost important for us, as Americans: "because so many of us build our lives around *pursuing* pleasure. It turns out that engagement and meaning are really where it's at."

How will you connect your *gifts* with the *needs* of others? In many ways, *this will become our legacy*...how we've connected our unique gifts with the needs of others. In every funeral these past weeks, of which we have had a few, we have celebrated some *rich* legacies. Just imagine the untold blessings that will grow, out of our lives, our generosity, too.

Blessings grow and multiply, don't they?

Saints Alive: we are shaped for generous living.

Saints Alive: we give, of ourselves, our time and our treasures.

Saints Alive: we are surrounded by a cloud of givers before us.

Saints Alive: we will create a legacy of generosity, too.

Saints Alive. You are a blessings. You are blessed. Thanks be to God! Amen.