

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 5, 2023

Blessed Saints

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

At this point if you have heard me preach more than a handful of times you likely know my definition of the word “righteousness.” My definition of righteousness is “right living,” or “living as we were created to live,” or even more fundamentally, “being who we were created to be.” That is what I mean when I use the term “righteousness.” My sermon today is intended to be both an exploration of, and definition for, the word “blessing.”

The word in the Greek itself is “*makários*” which comes from the root “*maka*” which means “happy.”¹ The word also contains shades of “favored” or “fortunate” or “enviable” or even “honored.” I've always had a bit of a hard time with the “happy” translation of the Greek here. Primarily because of verse four, those who are mourning are generally not very happy. Neither would those who hunger and thirst generally be considered enviable.

So, what does blessed mean? And what does it mean here in this context, coming from the lips of Jesus? In order to understand that we need to take a close look at the recipients of these blessings. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted, and those who are reviled. None of these groups could generally be described as happy or fortunate or enviable. None of those shades of meaning really ring true in this context.

But what about honored? Now that shade of meaning really intrigues me. Why? Because of the bookmark theme of this gospel. You may recall from previous sermons of mine that there is a case to be made that each of the four gospels provides you with its own interpretive lens by bookending the gospel with its theme. You have likely heard me say before that Matthew's bookend theme is Jesus as Emmanuel, or God-with-us. We see that expressed in Matthew 1:23 and again in Matthew 28:20b. Matthew wants us to learn of, and experience, God's close and intimate presence with us.

¹ Strong, J. (2007). *Strong's exhaustive concordance of the Bible*.

Now what is the connection between this bookend theme and being “honored” in our blessing? Well, there's not much greater honor than the presence and activity of God in our lives. And I believe that sort of honoring would be welcomed by the groups identified in our Gospel text. Those who are mourning or persecuted or any of the rest, absolutely need the presence and activity of God in their lives. Now it may not feel exactly like an honor, but maybe that's where those other shades of meaning come in too. The happiness, the fortune, and all of those things are found in God's presence... even in the midst of persecution and grief and all the rest.

But there's another reason I find myself gravitating lately towards the “honored” flavor of blessing. And that is the influence of a particular tradition of interpretation of these beatitudes. This tradition suggests that all of the groups identified by Jesus here in Matthew 5, are all groups who experience what Jesus himself experiences in his life on earth. Jesus knew poverty and grief; he knew hunger and thirst; he was meek and merciful; Jesus pursued peace and was certainly pure in heart; and, of course, Jesus was persecuted even unto death.

And we know from the teachings of Christ That all of this was necessary. It was necessary for Jesus to go through these things. And why? I'm not entirely sure, but I believe at least part of the answer is that Christ's life is an expression of God's solidarity and identification with these groups. God has honored Jesus by lifting his name above all others, and who did Jesus honor and identify with before that uplifting? Well, whoever Jesus honored, they must be very blessed indeed!

Jesus routinely blessed marginalized and oppressed people. He blessed them in his words and teachings. He blessed them by meeting their needs. He blessed them by exercising divine power on their behalf. But most powerfully of all, he blessed them with his very presence.

It should boggle our minds when we stop to think about it. God the creator of the universe and all that is in it. The source of all life and the sustainer of all that is. That God not only took on human flesh and form, human limitation and fragility. But having done so in the person of Jesus Christ, he specifically and intentionally seeks out the lowliest of the low in order to love and serve them. That's what a blessing is. The intimate, eternal, and powerful presence of God identifying with those whom the world ignores.

Allow me to offer my own wording that I hope gets at my point. God is with the poor in spirit and gives them the Kingdom of heaven. God is with those who mourn and will comfort them. God is with the meek and will give them

the earth. God is with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and will fill them. God is with the merciful and will show them mercy. God is with the pure in heart and will be revealed to them. God is with the peacemakers and will make them children of God. God is with those who are persecuted and will give them the kingdom of heaven. God is with you just as God was with the prophets who were before you.

So, when we speak of blessing people, we understand that we are seeing how God is with them, honoring them with God's presence and action in their lives. And when we pay attention to the gospels, the teachings of Jesus Christ, we will discover that those who are most consistently blessed are those who most need God's presence and power in their lives. Once again, we find that God provides us with exactly what we need.

On this All Saints Sunday we reflect upon the blessed Saints in light. People who clearly had the honor of God's presence with them and God's action in and through them. I would invite you to reflect upon how and where you saw God at work in the lives of the people you're remembering today. Perhaps that reflection might help you to see how God is honoring you right now, blessing you through God's presence and activity in your life.

I hope this exploration of the meaning of blessing will add a little more for you when we close our worship with communal words of blessing. As we get ready to go out into the world, we bless one another. We call upon God's presence in one another's lives. And we pray for the vision to see how God is with us and is working in us and through us.

Having been blessed by one another, we go out into the world to be a blessing to others. We go out into the world in order to be God's presence and action in the lives of the people we encounter. Particularly in the lives of those who are oppressed and marginalized; the very people whom Jesus served. To bless them as Jesus did, we must stand in solidarity with them and be present with them, even amid suffering and pain. This understanding of blessing has a cost to it. The same cost that following the Way of Christ does, your life. But it is a cost well worth paying, and it is one Christ paid first. You have been blessed, honored with the presence of God. Now go bless others, honor others, and be God's blessing to them. Amen.