

“Community of Blessing”  
November 6, 2011  
Scripture: I John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

It’s sort of a strange list Jesus makes of people who are blessed. Think about it: poor in spirit; mourners; meek; hunger and thirst for righteousness; merciful, maybe; pure in heart, perhaps; peacemakers...possibly; But persecuted, reviled, falsely accused? These people don’t sound all that blessed to me. They sound downtrodden, beaten up, and exploited. How can any of that possibly be blessed?

It doesn’t make much sense to us partly because we tend to equate blessing with fortune or luck. “How lucky are the poor in spirit,” “How lucky are the meek,” “How lucky are the persecuted!” Well, that doesn’t sound right at all, does it? And it’s not. Jesus isn’t talking about luck. He’s also not talking about happy. The word “happy” has become a popular substitute for “blessed” in some translations of the Bible. But that doesn’t work too well either. Happiness is an emotion that’s pretty subjective. What makes one person happy might make another miserable. And the qualities Jesus lists probably make more people miserable than happy most of the time.

So how do we understand this word “blessed?” Well, some of you have been studying for the last several months the Horizon series on the Beatitudes. Over the summer several of us went through the study in a weekly class after worship each Sunday. In that study you may have learned, as I did, that the word in Greek that we translate “blessed” actually has a somewhat different meaning than the one we usually attach to it. The author of the study, Margaret Aymer, associate professor of New Testament studies at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, points out that the Greek word *makarios* doesn’t so much mean blessed, as in good fortune but as in “greatly honored.”

So: “greatly honored are the poor in spirit;” “greatly honored are those who mourn;” “greatly honored are the meek;” “greatly honored are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;” and on and on. What Jesus is doing is describing a world where all our assumptions of what blessing and honor mean, things like wealth and power and prestige, are turned on their head. In the kingdom of God the people whom we think of as at the bottom of society are given special status; they’re honored and not despised.

So in these opening words to his sermon Jesus is engaging our imaginations and creating a world where everything we’ve come to accept as the order of things is revealed as a sham. He’s introducing a new order. And he’s calling his followers to become the community where that new order is brought to life.

Now that is a continuing challenge for the church. If you read, for instance, Paul’s letters to the young churches he shepherded you’ll find that they struggled to live out this calling. It’s not easy to live against the grain of society at any time. But at least those younger churches knew what they were up against. I think as the church became closer and closer to the seats of power in the world, it became harder and harder to resist defining itself by society’s standards and not by the standards Jesus lays out in the beatitudes.

But always there are those who call us back to ourselves. Those are the saints. They are the ones who seem to embody these qualities that Jesus calls honored or blessed. So think about the people in the church you would identify as saints, some of them gone, others still living. What are the qualities that define their lives? Are these people who are arrogant or ostentatious or self-centered? Because those qualities are revered in our society. We call people like that strong and successful and driven. We elect them to public offices all the time.

But are those the saints you've known? If you're like me, the saints you've known are people who have been hurt, people who have known disappointments and losses, people who have struggled and failed. They're people who have been humbled and who know what it means to ask God, "why?" Yet they are people whose faith has remained secure even in the face of uncertainty and anguish. They're the people who teach us what it means to endure not for the sake of reward but for the sake of living closer to God. They are the ones who teach us to be the community of blessing God intends. And for that we see them not as sad or empty or failed; we see them as blessed, and we honor them.

In these words of blessing Jesus is opening up a world to us where the strong no longer crush the weak, where the mournful no longer weep alone, where the poor in spirit are lifted up and given hope. That's the community we're called to be. In John's letter he uses that wonderful sentence: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." To be children of God means to be given a new identity, a new set of values, a new way of seeing ourselves and the world around us. As God's children we're invited to see through God's eyes, to see through eyes of compassion and not suspicion, through eyes of love and not indifference. The saints among us have accepted that invitation.

The question for us, then, is can we accept it? Can we accept Jesus' invitation into the new world he describes? Can we let go of our attachment to the values of society and culture and embrace the values of God's kingdom? Others have done it. We know because we've seen them; we've walked with them; we've been inspired by them. So we know it's not beyond our reach. By lifting up those who are brought low; by walking alongside the downtrodden; by embracing the persecuted and rejected, we can become the community of blessing God intends us to be; we can point the way to God's kingdom unfolding among us.

Amen