

***Jesus In Real Life: #1 “Blessed are those with nothing”
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Matthew 5:1-11

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Jesus offers a startling blessing, extending God’s comfort to those who are crushed, and inviting disciples to see what it means open ourselves to God in complete humility.

I’m told that “Bless his heart” is as loaded a phrase as you may ever hear from the mouth of a southerner. I am told that it is one of their most versatile phrases: it can mean “well, that is simply terrible,” though it most often means, “Thank the Lord you have good looks because you certainly do not have any brains.”

So, southerners, the next time you tell me “Bless your heart,” I’m on to you!

Jesus crawls up the mountain, sits down before the crowd, and blesses them. He does not say “Bless your hearts,” (I think he reserves that for when he’s alone with the disciples). He blesses them, pronouncing words which are both comfort and instruction.

These words are so familiar to us – we see them on greeting cards and posters, refrigerator magnets and Internet memes – and yet we read over them quickly, forgetting that they are not just lines from a screenwriter or a poet. These words may bring us comfort, but they also bring challenge, and we would do well to read them slowly. These

are words spoken to real people, and they are words that address their very real circumstances.

If we read them just as quick as we say, “Bless his heart,” we may miss their deeper meaning – for not only do these words comfort, but they also instruct. They exhort. They challenge. They point us in new directions:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. Blessed are you.

Years ago, I stepped off the elevator at a cancer floor at Children’s Hospital in Kansas City. It is hardly the place where you expect to find blessings. I walked the long hallway looking for the room of a young boy I was coming to see. I was hardly a newbie to cancer wards, but it struck me: room after room, family after family, child after child, suffering from real pain.

I wondered: what could I say to them? What word of hope could I bring? Could I tap into the rich reservoir of scripture and find a word that could bring comfort, or show God’s love?

It was a moment when reality came crashing through my relatively comfortable life, challenging me to rethink everything that I had assumed about meaning, happiness, and joy in life.

Another time, I remember when some of the folks from this church found themselves helping a refugee family from Burundi. This family had been relocated from a refugee camp to St. Louis. They knew little about the United States, little about our customs. They had no money and were living in an apartment in north city. They came off the airplane without shoes in the middle of winter. A few folks from

Woodlawn heard about their needs and set about providing them with furniture, food, clothes. And more than once I heard one of our folks say, “this was about as real as it gets.”

Real words, spoken to real people. That is the challenge of the Beatitudes: to hear them not as words from a greeting card or an inspirational poster, but as words that are about as real as they get. Words that address real pain, and words that may crash through your relatively comfortable life, challenging you to rethink meaning, happiness, joy.

Listen to these blessings, not only for a bit of practical advice, but also listen for the way God calls us to live. As Karoline Lewis says, our lives do not reach their full meaning until we discover God’s presence in the middle.

The beatitudes provide an opportunity to meet Jesus IRL – Jesus in real life. These words of blessing are not abstract concepts, but invitations to join our lives to God.

As a vivid story teller, Matthew offers us the image Jesus crawling his way up the mountain – a symbol that what follows is of holy significance. Jesus sits down, surrounded by disciples, with these crowds milling around below. He sees the crowds, and he begins to teach and to bless. This is not a group where partiality to the rich has been shown. This is a group which is diverse, united in their yearning for God to reach them in their real lives.

And so Jesus speaks. But his words are more than comfort. They challenge us by reversing our normal experiences and expectations of the world. In Greek, the word blessed can also mean “how happy,” or “how fortunate.” So, for example, one translation reads:

“Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. “Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad. “Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth. “Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full. “Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy. “Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God. “Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children. “Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. “Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me.

This makes no sense: “happy are the hopeless?” “How fortunate are those who are grieving?”

It doesn’t make any sense, until you begin to realize that these words are being spoken to those who are bearing crushing loads, whose spirits have been broken, who have, in the wonderful words of Anne Lamott, come to the end of their rope, only to have Jesus show up and help them tie a knot at the end. The broken, the hurting, the grieving – these are the ones Jesus calls fortunate. These are the ones who belong to God, who have a place in God’s kingdom.

The little boy in the cancer war. The African refugee. The grieving widows. The kids being bullied at school. The person contemplating suicide. The mom working two jobs to get groceries on the table.

Jesus’ word to us in real life is this: those who think they have things all sorted out, those who believe the meaning of life is found in material wealth, those who place a higher priority on greed than

humility have got it wrong. Jesus turns the tables on this sort of privilege, and instead says:

Blessed are those who have nothing. How fortunate are those who are struggling.

There is the instruction for us: Jesus sees the crowd. He sees their affliction, the soiled bandages, the tattered clothes. The odor of their afflictions are not hard to miss. They are not just poor, but desperately poor. They are afflicted, -- burdened by brokenness, cut up by depression, riddled with anger and disappointment. They are the brothers and sisters James described. They are the children of immigrants, families who cut our grass and wash the dishes in the restaurants where we eat.

Jesus does not retreat from the crowds, but instead embraces them with a vision of God's grace and love. He speaks to them IRL – in real life.

And he teaches the disciples that to such as these belong the kingdom of God.

I wonder what it would be like for us to follow Jesus into our community. Here's an experiment: can you imagine how different our church would be if we were to take up the challenge to live these words? Imagine how things might be different if we took Jesus at his word, and allowed these words to change our lives? What would it be like let us go into our neighborhoods as disciples sent by Jesus.

We're not going to knock on doors to bother people – you know the old joke, what's the difference between a Jehovah's Witness and a Presbyterian at your door? The Presbyterian knocks but doesn't know what to say. I wonder what it would be like for us to live these words by going into our neighborhoods prepared to listen and to see.

Not preaching necessarily, but listening for stories of the hopeless, the poor, the broken hearted, the excluded, the people who have been told “Your kind isn’t welcome in church.” Go into the coffee shops, libraries, schools, offices with ears attuned for those struggling for air, who are at the end of their rope, who are overrun by difficulty. What would it be like if Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church became known as the place where, when you’re at the end of your rope, people came around helped you tie a knot on it?

But let’s take this challenge. It’s not a challenge to go and say anything. Instead, it is a challenge that says to us, “Where are the brokenhearted along Clayton Road? Where are those who have been crushed?”

Amen.