



Reflections by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 6:17-31

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An Honest Blessing

There are two sets of beatitudes in the gospels – the nine beatitudes of Jesus recorded in Matthew 5 and the four beatitudes recorded in Luke 6. All of them start with the Greek word *makarios*, which means “blessed.” In ancient Greece, that word used to refer to the gods who were blessed and lived eternally in their heavenly realm. Later it referred to the dead, those who had died and now resided in the blessed realm of the gods. Eventually it also referred to the elite, rich, and powerful who were blessed with prosperity and good fortune. But Jesus turned that word *makarios* on its head. He surprisingly said, “Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated, excluded, and reviled by others.” These people were not used to being called ‘blessed.’ Jesus chose to speak words of kindness to them as a way to model the amazing grace of God. It is similar to something spoken by Jesus’ mother Mary when she found out she was pregnant with the Son of God. In her Magnificat, she said, “From now on all generations will call me *makarios*, blessed. [For] God’s mercy has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:46ff)

Having said that, if most of us had to choose between the two sets of beatitudes, we’d opt for Matthew’s version because there are more of them and because those earlier beatitudes are not followed by woes, like they are in Luke. Luke blessed the poor, hungry, grieving, and persecuted ones and then he said, “But woe to you who are rich, who are satisfied and have plenty to eat, who are laughing and always spoken well of.” On one level, it makes sense – four blessings balanced out with four woes. Life is like that, isn’t it? Good and bad, blessings and woes come to all of us. Like the country music singer Mary Chapin Carpenter said, “Sometimes you’re the windshield; sometimes you’re the bug.”

But if we’re honest, we want Jesus to say good beatitudes to us and to aim his words of woe at others. We want to be the ones gestured to when Jesus pronounces, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” and then we want to see exactly who Jesus points at when he says, “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” It’s like the parable of the sheep and goats found in Matthew 25. We want to be the ones called to stand on the king’s right side, who were called blessed for caring for the hungry, thirsty, sick, and imprisoned in the world, as opposed to those on the left side who neglected those in need and were cast out into eternal punishment. Or it’s like the language used in Psalm 1 that Rob read earlier. We want to be told “Blessed are you who don’t follow the advice of the wicked and who delight in the Lord,” while

we don't want to be lumped in with the wicked, who "are like chaff the wind drives away and who will perish."

But one look in the mirror reminds us we are a mixture of good and bad, light and darkness; sometimes we're the windshield and sometimes we're the bug. If we are honest about our personal faith, we know that to be true. The story is told about an Amish farmer who was confronted by an overly enthusiastic church evangelist. The evangelist asked him, "Brother, have you been saved? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" To which the farmer replied, "Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here is the name of my banker, my grocer, my neighbor, and my farm hands. Ask them if I am saved!"

We are all mixed bags of righteousness. Depending on the day or the hour, we may be ones for whom blessings from heaven fall gently on our ears and are appropriate for us to hear. Other times we need words of criticism to thump us on the chest and remind us we need to change and do better. That's the power of Psalm 1 and of Luke's blessings and woes. They were not spoken to divide the world into us vs. them. They simply acknowledge that we all live our lives in both categories; that some things we do lead to blessings and other things lead to woe. Yet through it all, God in Christ sees us, knows us, loves us, and will not forsake us. That is why this combination of blessings and woes, good news and bad news is what makes Jesus' words a truly honest message for us today.

This same two-sided tension is at the heart of All Saints Day. Today we lift up the memories of those who have died – those from this church family who died in the past year as well as those whose death even years ago remains a wound on our hearts. We remember them with love and joy for having known them and learned from them. Yet we remember them with sadness, separated from them as we are by the reality of death, the chasm that divides the quick from the dead. Happiness and grief, blessing and woe are two sides of one coin. People commonly say to me when we're planning a funeral service, "I don't want this to be a sad event. I want it to be a celebration of life." That's an understandable sentiment, but it is also a fundamental denial of what it means to be human. If a funeral is only happy memories and talk of heaven, then we've offered no real comfort to those who mourn here on earth. It would be all flower bouquets with no cemetery plots. It would be all Easter with no cross or Good Friday shadows.

To be faithful when talking about death requires an honest word that combines blessings and woes – that acknowledges the sadness of Mary Magdalene weeping at the tomb as well as her running back to the disciples shouting, "I have seen the risen Lord!" It requires a lit candle on All Saints Day in honor of a loved one who is not here and yet the grateful memory of what it means to have had them as a part of our life and still near to us in the great cloud of witnesses. It is the blending of reverential music like today's choir anthem that speaks honestly and faithfully about those who have died, those for

whom our prayer is that if they cannot be with us, may they rest in peace eternally:
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.

Jesus speaks honest words of blessings and woes to us. But just when we start to wonder, “Lord, what should I do now?” he moves beyond those words and speaks honestly to us mixed souls by saying, “Go now and love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Give to all who beg from you. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Along with giving us those instructions, Jesus also prepares us for the journey ahead by inviting us to share a meal – saints and sinners alike, together at one table. No reservation needed. No proof of citizenship. No résumé of righteousness. The blessed and not-so-blessed – all are invited here. What Jesus says to us over and over again is that you belong. You are seen, known, loved, and redeemed. Yes, grief and joy are part of this life, but that is not the whole story. Right now, come to the table hosted by the one who has something more to say: the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. Honestly, that’s exactly what we need to hear. AMEN