

## **Blessed**

Rev. John Allen

I think we've gotten confused about the word blessed.

For those of you who use social media with any regularity, you may have become accustomed to seeing the hashtag "blessed" adorning photos of luxurious vacations, expensive meals, and cell-phone photographs of Hamilton Playbills.

And even just in our everyday language, we often use the word blessed to mean fortunate, or even lucky. We use it to mean that we got what we wanted. That things finally worked out.

And don't get me wrong. I don't mind people experiencing those moments as moments of blessing. At least insomuch as it shows they understand at some level that their ability to enjoy experiences like that are a gift, and a privilege, that is not afforded to everyone.

But it is kind of interesting to compare the sorts of things we might routinely describe as blessings, with the list that Jesus gives us.

Blessed are the poor

Blessed are those who mourn

Blessed are the meek

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

Blessed are the merciful

Blessed are the pure in heart

Blessed are the peacemakers

Blessed are those who are persecuted

And perhaps most strikingly: blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

In other words, as Jesus so often does, it is the exact opposite of what we might expect.

Jesus is pointing us toward the places where we might be least likely to experience blessing, and saying there, right there. God is there.

That is what blessing is after all. It is taking an ordinary thing and taking time to notice what is holy about it. Taking time to pay attention to the way that God is present where we might not have noticed.

It is an act by which we remember that God is in the midst of everything. A blessing is the speaking of good words, of words of hope, and love, and intention.

We bless homes to mark our intention that they be sanctuaries of love and peace.

We bless the dying to remember the promises of God that will not end when they draw their last breath.

The act of blessing is bold. It is our boldly faithful claim that God is present in the midst of our world, that God's love is real and alive not just in church sanctuaries, but in the places where we make our everyday lives.

One way to hear today's reading would be as a list that limits blessing. You could hear it as a list of conditions to receive blessing. You must be poor, meek, reviled, grieving peacemakers if you are to encounter God's blessing.

But I don't think that is quite right. I think this list is meant to expand blessing. It is God's way of saying to us once again that God's presence overflows every way we try to contain it, that God is not just present when things are going great, but God is present when things are at their worst, and hardest.

In fact I think Jesus is telling us that God is often especially close to the down-and-out, the hurting, the last, and the least.

I don't think Jesus is trying to teach us about blessing, so much as he is just trying to bless people. The people who might have been sitting in front of him on the side of the mountain, most of whom were poor, many of whom were surely grieving, and some of whom would face revulsion and scorn for their decision to follow him.

Jesus is once again making the point that the traditional ways of measuring success and favorability, are not the way that God keeps score. And the kind of people who get all the attention are not the ones who are catching God's eye.

Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber recently published a set of contemporary blessings, or beatitudes as this part of Jesus' teaching is often called. It takes Jesus' pattern of lifting up those who are often left aside and naming their blessedness. Here are beatitudes she offers.

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Blessed are the agnostics. Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are the unimpressive.

Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean.

Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.

Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet."

Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted.

Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.

Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.

Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists. Blessed are foster kids and special-ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.

Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people. Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro-bono case takers.

Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak.

Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven. Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it.

Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.

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It would be easy to go through life chasing what we think we want, envious of those who seem to attain what we cannot, growing resentful of the things that have become familiar to us, that were once actually our biggest dreams.

And it would be easy to get God's will all tangled up with ours, and just take the outward trappings of a 'successful life' as signs of God's favor and presence.

And it happens often that when things get hard, we quickly begin to interpret that as evidence of God's absence.

But Jesus is blessing with a different kind of blessing here. Jesus is pointing at the broken and hurting places in the world to say, I am there.

And he is pointing at the broken and hurting places in your heart, and saying, I am there.

Blessed are you. you. you.

Blessed are you.