

Living the Reward
Sermon by Leah Fowler
Sunday, January 29, 2017
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Matthew 5:1-12

Micah 6:1-8

Yesterday morning I got up early to bring together all the commentaries and articles I had been reading to write a sermon for you today. As soon as I ushered my wife and child out the door for their day in New York City with Kai's cousin and snuggled up to my laptop, the power on my end of the block went out, thanks to a utility project next door. Since the electricity showed no sign of coming back anytime soon, I packed my computer into my backpack and hopped a bus into the city, where I was planning to meet up with a group that night for my friend Emily's birthday party.

I spent the first hour gathering the snippets of ideas that had sparked me in the articles I had read the previous week to work into my message on blessing. Knowing it was the Lunar New Year this weekend and that we'd celebrate it the next, I had stumbled upon the word *bok* which means blessing in Korean. The article I had read was comparing Korean notions of *bok* with Jesus' meaning of blessing. Coincidentally, the two people sitting in my alcove using the cafe's free wifi were young Korean Americans. I couldn't help but overhear their conversation, which wandered from topics of the quickly changing US politics on immigration to relationships with first generation Korean immigrants. When I heard their conversation wrapping up as they were getting ready to leave, I gained the courage to ask them their opinion of the meaning of the Korean concept of *bok*, or blessing.

We had a very interesting conversation! They told me that in Korea, *bok* or blessing is based very much on the Korean shamanistic traditions. At

Lunar New Year, it is custom for younger children to bow to their elders and tell them “May you receive the blessings of the New Year.” And by saying the words, and eating the rice cake soup served at the end of the ritual, the blessing will become more real. “But,” said these young adults who are also Christian, “the idea of blessing in Korea is not the same kind of blessing Jesus offers.” Why not? I asked. “Bok in Korea usually points you toward wealth. Jesus’s blessings point us more toward God.” With that, they took off and left me to ponder the depth of this statement from my very non-Korean perspective as I once again sorted through my commentaries.

After they left, two new people moved in to share the cushioned chairs in my alcove. By then I was back in a writing zone, or so I thought-- when I noticed one of them, a South Asian young man, laughing while looking out the window and nodding his approval. I followed his gaze and with him watched a man outside in a knit cap drop a string down the subway grate, lower it, and pull out a dollar bill. We gave him a thumbs up through the glass as we pondered the mechanics of how he got a dollar bill to attach to a 12-foot piece of string. I stared back at my computer screen trying to follow again my train of thought when finally, I told those working near me in the alcove “I’m a pastor working on a sermon, but I don’t think this sermon is going to come from my screen; I think it is outside this computer.” I shut down my computer and walked outside and introduced myself to the man on the street. The other man from the cafe, who I learned is named Lavana, was not far behind me.

Eliel Santos is known on the street as Fisherman. He uses a long piece of dental floss, weighted by a fishing anchor with a big glob of mousetrap glue at the end. On a good day, he told Lavana and me, he finds up to \$100. On a couple of great days, he has found \$1000 or more. I encountered him in the Flatiron district, but he mostly works from there to Times Square, because it is full of tourists who lose things. While Fisherman gets excited about finding money, he also shared the great joy he feels when he helps someone recover something that was lost: he has helped with iPhones,

keychains, and on one occasion he found a wedding ring. For the very personal things, he returns them to their owners without a request for a reward-- but with that wedding ring, the woman who lost it stayed in touch with him and sent \$100 a month for a year in thanks for recovering this connection to her deceased husband. "Helping others," he told me, "that's what makes me feel blessed!" And he continued, story after story, of blessings he had discovered. It occurred to me that Fisherman, who had shared with me that he is homeless, is in recovery from addiction, and has a disability that, if not taken care of, could cause the amputation of his legs, is more ready to receive blessing than many of us will ever be.

Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people!"¹ I am convinced that there is some aspect of blessing that gathers us in a net together with God's people. And yesterday, I felt like God was showing me that I would find blessing by opening my ears to what people around me would tell me. As the day progressed, I heard an increasing anger and disappointment from the people in my path as we all absorbed the impact of America's new policy on closed doors to immigrants from 7 different countries. It did not matter whether they were refugees or recruits to the nation's top educational institutions; at customs, they were detained. When I arrived at my friend Emily's birthday party, Emily announced that she wished her party had been planned for JFK Airport, where protests were going on, instead of the East Village. Lavana, who was at my coffeeshop earlier, spoke of how he as an Indian American man has been harassed in the streets in New York City several times since November, whereas in his many years of study in the US, including at Georgia Tech in Atlanta, people never insulted him because of his race or his Hindu beliefs and practice. His friend, a white woman of Polish descent, said that while she was ordering kebob from a Halal kiosk in the city, 2 white men screamed at her that she should stay away from terrorists.

¹ Matthew 4:19

The Christian Century magazine reports that 91% of the US Congress identifies as Christian. This country's president says he is a Christian. And yet, the policies coming out of Washington in the past week and the behavior they encourage do nothing but curse the poor in spirit-- and more specifically literal poor, which Luke's Sermon on the Plain claims are the blessed ones.

Pope Francis gave a message to a gathering of Lutherans and Catholics together, and it is a message Christians of all stripes should agree with: "You cannot be a Christian without living like a Christian," he said. "You cannot be a Christian without practicing the Beatitudes. You cannot be a Christian without doing what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 25." -- that is where Jesus says "For I was hungry and you fed me" and tells his followers for as much as you do it for the least of these, you do it for me.

The pope continued, "It's hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, toss out someone who is in need of my help," he said. "If I say I am Christian, but do these things, I'm a hypocrite."²

Does it feel like the values of Christianity somehow got dropped into the grates of the subway, left and forgotten? We need Fisherman to pull out his string and anchor and mouse trap glue to pull these values out. For in seeking our own reward, we are shutting the door to blessing all around us.

The thing about Jesus' understanding of blessing-- and this is very counter-cultural-- is that it shows God to be God of the destitute, the God of the poor and of the wronged. It shows that Jesus is sitting in the detention areas of JFK airport, at JFK and Dulles, among those cursed by these new policies and by the long and difficult journey to get here and by the reasons that may have brought them to America in the first case, such as a rejection of violence and a hope that their children could survive and have a decent

² Catholic News Service, "Pope Francis: You can't defend Christianity by being 'against refugees and other religions'" in *Catholic Herald*, October 13, 2015

life. God is with them and saying “Oh no, you have it all wrong. These are my blessed ones, don’t you see?” God is near them now, and when we fail to see that, we place our lives one step or many steps further from God.

If it feels to you that Christian meaning has been lost, I am convinced that as a community we can together find and reclaim it. This is not an “I alone can do this” kind of project. We really need each other, to pray and to support, to challenge and to call out hypocrisy when we see it and to stay humble when we try to put ourselves first.

It is hard work, so where is our reward? I would argue that our reward does not only wait for us in a spiritual afterlife; our reward is something we live *now*, and it may not look like what we would expect. Our reward is in the journey. Martin Luther, catalyst for the Protestant Reformation, said "This life therefore is not righteousness, but *growth* in righteousness, not health, but *healing*, not being but *becoming*, not rest but *exercise*. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."³

Now, if I can quote both Martin Luther and the Roman Catholic Pope in the same sermon, there is hope for the collective witness we Christians can make. That hope is the teachings of Jesus. Let us reach deep and rediscover them together, or perhaps find them as a first-time treasure. I am blessed to be on this journey with you, and with Jesus. Amen.

³ Martin Luther, *Defense of All the Articles*, Lazareth transl., as found in Grace Brame, *Receptive Prayer* (Chalice Press, 1985) p.119