

“Bizarrely Blessed”
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Before I preach this sermon on blessings, I want to read one more scripture to you. This scripture will give greater depth to our understanding of blessing as Jesus describes it.

The verses are from Genesis 32, and the background I want you to understand is that Jacob and Esau, twin brothers who had been in competition since the day of their birth, have lived apart for many years after Jacob cheated his older twin out of his birthright and blessing by their father Isaac. The time finally comes when Jacob prepares to approach his brother and ask forgiveness. Before he goes, he first sends his wives, his children, and all his servants across the river towards Esau’s land, but in preparation Jacob remains on his side of the river and camps alone. The story picks up here:

Genesis 32:24-28

²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” ²⁷ So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ Then the man^[b] said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,^[c] for you have striven with God and with humans,^[d] and have prevailed.”

I will not let you go until you bless me. Remember that phrase as we now turn to Jesus’ teaching from Luke today. I promise, this phrase will become important again.

Now let’s fast-forward a couple thousand years, to another time of blessing, in Luke’s gospel. Jesus begins his speech by telling the crowds, “Blessed are *you...*”

Can you think of a recent time when you felt blessed? Maybe it is when you got good news from a doctor. Perhaps on Valentine's Day you felt blessed to be with someone you love-- or relief and blessing that you did not end up with that *other* person who just wasn't right. Maybe it was in here, when you witnessed the baptism of one of our recent toddlers, and were moved by the Holy Spirit's presence in the water and on the smiling faces of loving parents and family members.

Jesus spoke about blessing:

Blessed are you who are poor...

Blessed are you who are hungry...

Blessed are you who weep now...

Blessed are you when people hate and exclude you...

Wait a minute! What kind of bizarre blessings are these?!?

To understand how Jesus could suggest such bizarre blessings, let us first step back and look at the crowd Jesus was speaking to. The scripture says "They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them."

Try to imagine a crowd like this. Diseased. Troubled. Unclean spirits. Reaching out with longing, trying to touch Jesus and take some of his power for their healing. Jesus gives them healing, and not only that, blessing.

I find it interesting that in Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives a speech that is quite similar, with only a few changes. However, in Matthew's gospel we tend to call it the Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus ascended a mountain; we can see him there standing above the listening crowd, and his presence on the mountaintop reminds us of his closeness to God, just as Moses stood on the mountaintop to communicate to God and receive the law from God.

But Luke's version of the story looks different. In Luke, Jesus does not ascend a mountain. Instead, he stood and spoke to the crowd "on a level place." He is among the people, and we can almost imagine the stench of their suffering as

they reach to him for healing from their diseases and possessions. While Matthew's version records Jesus saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn... as if these blessed ones are some nameless group of people one might encounter, in Luke's gospel it is like Jesus looks the listeners right in the eye when he says, "Blessed are *you* who are poor, for *yours* is the kingdom of heaven."

The writer or writers of Luke seem to be dealing with the reality that the Kingdom of God that Jesus promised has not come, at least, not as quickly as expected. And so, the people who love God are still living under Roman occupation. They know the limits of their own bodies, their diseases-- and remember, Luke is writing several decades after Jesus' death, so they also know the suffering that Jesus had endured under the Roman government. Although they had been promised that the Kingdom of God would come forward in their lifetime, more than a generation has since passed, and they are still enduring the same suffering, the same weaknesses, the same oppression.

Jesus' instruction for them in Luke is not to wait for some far-off reward, but instead to live as if the kingdom or realm of God is already here. This way of life does not fit the rules of the world, rules that honor the greedy and protect those who put themselves first. These rules are for somewhere else.

In the past week, we have had more than one mass shooting in this country. And much more locally, we heard the whirling of helicopters overhead, all night long, as a fire blazed in Fort Lee, destroying an apartment building and the 40-something homes within. We see the diseased of body and diseased of mind, sometimes in the expected form of strangers begging for money on our commute to work, and sometimes our own bodies and minds become strange to us as weakness inhabits us. Jesus knows we suffer today, so how can we create a holy space in the midst of the suffering we see and know to discover blessing?

Korean American author Mihee Kim-Kort writes of a practice she has begun, serving three times weekly at a local homeless shelter. She confesses there are times in her service when she is revolted-- by the stench of the guests, the dirty, mismatched clothes, and the occasional moment when someone comes in who is drunk or high and screams something inappropriate or hostile. She confesses

that society has taught her to see these people, homeless and jobless, as untrustworthy, or lazy, or weak.

However, in the encounter she also finds blessing. Sometimes-- not all the time-- she is able to see something more. She writes, I am “regularly and blatantly impressed with the miracle of humanity all around me, to realize that the people in front of me are my people and not ‘those people.’ I’m choosing to show up-- imperfectly, with all my judgmental thoughts that I have to squish down out of my brain. I show up to be reminded that my humanity is not dependent on what I wear or how I smell or what I think or see, but is rooted in the *imago Dei*-- Image of God-- as I experience it... in connection to those around me.” If “the incarnate God is present even in the people and places I least expect,” then maybe God can be present in me.¹

Remember once again the demand Jacob made of the man of God he wrestled until daybreak: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So the man blessed Jacob, with a new name: Israel, which means *struggles with God*.

To put our trust in God’s realm means that whether we are faced with what seems like a curse, we will struggle with it, and we will not let go of our hope in what God can do until we receive a blessing.

I was moved by the heroism of the Fort Lee Fire Department over the weekend. One of the mid-sized apartment buildings was devoured Thursday night by a blazing fire. I texted church member Kristen Richter, to find out if her husband Chris was ok. She was thankful that he had been able to text her and say he was ok, but her compassion was deep for her neighbors who lived in that building, over 40 families that lost their homes and possessions. The next morning she had updated her Facebook page. Chris had spent the night battling the blazes, and had only come home in the wee hours of the morning. He only got a few minutes’ sleep before he returned to the scene to relieve other firefighters. The persistence of these public servants was amazing. It was as if they looked at that fire and told it, “I will not leave you until you bless me;” for them, a blessing was that every resident made it out of the building alive. To

¹ Mihee Kim-Kort, *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith* pp. 64-65

them, a blessing was that the fire did not destroy the other half of the building. To them, a blessing was the firefighters having the backs of one another, keeping each other safe. So many saw the loss of homes as a curse, but as much as possible neighbors worked to help neighbors, bringing over food and clothing to the emergency shelter, offering prayer and comfort.

Preacher and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber shared in a reflection, “Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, those for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are they who no one else notices... the kids who sit alone at the middle school lunch table, the forgotten, the closeted, the unemployed, the unimpressive, and the underrepresented... for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.

As we prepare to receive the Sacrament of Communion, may you be blessed to be a blessing. May *you* become a sign of the fulfillment of Jesus’ promises here on earth today, whether you are a receiver of good news, or someone who, by acting out Jesus’ vision, offers bread for the hungry, justice for the oppressed, and comfort for the brokenhearted. May your life be touched by the power of Jesus so that you may be blessed, and offer blessing to others.

Blessed are you.