Message “#Blessed”

The gospel reading for today comes from Matthew’s account of the life of Jesus. At this point in the story of Jesus, he has been baptized by John the Baptist and acknowledged by the Spirit of God – “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” He then experienced 40 days of temptation by the devil in the wilderness and came out to begin his ministry in Galilee. Last we left off, he called his first disciples to leave their families and fishing trade for the purpose of following him and “fishing of people”… more disciples, or followers of the Way.

Matthew 4:23 “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” As you might imagine, this created quite a buzz in the region and crowds began to follow him everywhere. We find him this week on the mountain addressing his disciples and the crowds in The Sermon on the Mount. It is in this sermon he introduces the Beatitudes – the word comes from the Latin noun beātitūdō, which means "happiness”. The Beatitudes present a new set of Christian ideals that focus on a spirit of love and humility.

Jesus’ message offers a completely different orientation than the predominant thinking of the day. In the ancient world, and even today, many people believed strongly in cause and effect. They believed that if they were good people who followed God’s commandments, worked hard, and tried to do their best in all circumstances, God would reward them with good health, food to eat, stable jobs, happy families, and prosperity. Likewise, they believed that God punished the sinful with illness, poverty, imprisonment, blindness, divorce, and other personal tragedy. Many believed that God even punished entire sinful populations through war, famine, droughts, and other disasters.

If a man was sick, or mourning, or poor in spirit, or starving, or persecuted, it was his own fault for sinning. A woman who suffered did so as the consequence of her own bad behavior because suffering was understood as punishment for sin. But Jesus is saying it doesn’t work like that in the kingdom of God. It isn’t that we are wrong to feel #blessed when something goes our way. But when things do not go our way, that doesn’t mean God is punishing us either. God’s kingdom is a whole different playing field.

Many might construe The Sermon on the Mount to be instructive. In other words, here is the list of ways to be in order to be blessed… We should try real hard to be meeker, poorer and “mournier” in order to be blessed in the eyes of God. But I see it differently. I read a sermon by Nadia Bolz Weber (senior pastor of the church named “House for all Sinners and Saints” in Denver, CO) that helped me think about it this way – what if Jesus’ pronouncement of these blessings is actually his conferring of the blessing itself?

I think the sermon on the mount is all about Jesus’ seemingly lavish blessing of the world around him – especially those with whom society doesn’t seem to hold up as successful or even have much time for – people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance. I think that is what he is doing. Jesus is blessing people, especially the people who never seem to receive blessings otherwise. I mean, come on, doesn’t that just sound like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grew on trees?

Jesus blesses everyone who has gathered, no matter who they are and no matter what they have done. God’s blessing is not just for certain religious groups, or certain genders, or certain sexual orientations, or certain cultural or racial groups. God’s blessing is not just for those who are pure,
who go to church and give to charities and treat people with kindness. And God’s blessing is not evidenced by a big bank account or a fancy title or a luxury home. In this new kingdom that Jesus is showing us, God blesses the saints and sinners alike. Jesus offers a blessing on the poor in wallet and the poor in spirit. He blesses the blind, the lame, the imprisoned, the outcast. He blesses the leper and the prostitute. He blesses the murderer and the thief and the adulterer. He blesses the Jews and the Christians, the Muslims and the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Ba’hai. He blesses the Democrats and the Republicans and the Independents alike. In Christ, God’s blessing does not discriminate. God’s blessing is for all. God’s blessing is for you. God’s blessing is for me.

That’s good news, don’t you think? It means that no matter who you are or what you have done, you are blessed and you are welcomed into God’s family, and there is nothing you can do, ever, to lose God’s love, affirmation, and blessing.

Jesus wants the listeners to know that all God’s people are blessed.

What this passage reveals to us about God is that God is a God of everyday life...

God is a God of everyday people:
…people who are elderly and feel passed over not only by friends but family;
…people who are young and struggle to find a place to offer their gifts;
… people who are activists in a world that values conformity;
… people who are poor and do not always know how they will make it to the first of the month;
… people who are foreigners and do not speak the language or understand how to fit into society;
… people who are disabled, disenfranchised or marginalized because of their differences;
… people who are recovering from addictions, violence, divorce or any other turmoil from their past;
…people who suffer from mental or emotional inflictions such as anxiety, depression or insomnia;
… people who are sick and afraid they will not find the help they need to become well.

God blesses each of them.

Social media uses a “hash tag” (#) to track trends. There is a trend of #Blessed on Facebook now. When you sort the posts with this hash tag you will see all kinds of God’s people claiming their blessings.

_Blessed to receive an offer from the University of North Carolina! #blessed_  
_Very excited for next year blessed to be a part of the rugby team for 2017. #blessed_  
_Happiness is finding leftover chipotle in the fridge that you'd forgotten about. #blessed_  
_As long as I was able to encourage/inspire at least one person, then I did what I was suppose to do. #blessed_  
_A photo of a happy family with the description: Thank you God for all my blessings. Gracias a Dios por todas las bendiciones. #blessed_  

Our common sense tells us that among these folks there is also pain, suffering and lost-ness. Just like them, God blesses each of us - in all of our mess.

How many #blessed moments can you think of …in the midst of your struggles?

Life can be messed up. We can be messed up.
God meets us in our mess and showers us with unconditional love.

Christian pop artist Amy Grant wrote a beautiful song titled, *Better Than a Hallelujah* that goes like this:

God loves a lullaby  
In a mother’s tears in the dead of night  
Better than a Hallelujah sometimes.  
God loves a drunkard’s cry,  
The soldier’s plea not to let him die  
Better than a Hallelujah sometimes.

We pour out our miseries  
God just hears a melody  
Beautiful the mess we are  
The honest cries of breaking hearts  
Are better than a Hallelujah.

The woman holding on for life,  
The dying man giving up the fight  
Are better than a Hallelujah sometimes  
The tears of shame for what’s been done,  
The silence when the words won’t come  
Are better than a Hallelujah sometimes.

We pour out our miseries  
God just hears a melody  
Beautiful the mess we are  
The honest cries of breaking hearts  
Are better than a Hallelujah.

God blesses *us*. Not because of how special we are, or what we may someday do. But because of who God is… Love, pure unconditional love for us… Love that builds a new way of life. Heavenly love.

The kingdom of heaven is near for God’s people. It is breaking in, uprising. It is now. We are blessed now.

God blesses *us* and God chooses *us* to bring about the Kingdom of heaven here on earth.

Jesus started his ministry by calling together all those whose experience left them feeling lonely and isolated, by touching them and healing them. They went from belonging to no kingdom to belonging to the kingdom of heaven. Just like us.

Because we are blessed, we are called to bless others.

God’s people help bring about the kingdom by turning away from selfishness and exhibiting the qualities of mercy, humility, good heartedness and compassion towards all others.

It can be difficult to live in the way Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount. Mainstream culture invites us to “look out for number one”. Our culture holds up the “me” mindset… a mindset of concern for only *my* stuff, *my* community and *my* country at the expense of others.
Our culture invites a mindset that encourages being insular to the rest of society, …even the world. Our culture preaches that celebrity, wealth, pride and “sticking with those like us” will lead to being happy.

Living in God’s ways while surrounded in the world’s ways requires great spiritual discipline. Even the most devoted followers of Christ must work hard at continuously emptying “self” and repressing fear by filling up with God’s love. Prayer, worship, meditation and small group accountability are just a few of the disciplines we have to help us as followers of Christ.

The Beatitudes echo the teachings of Jesus on mercy, spirituality, and compassion. They paint the picture of a different way of being in the world – God’s way – the way of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount offers us a new and different attitude towards life – one of humbleness, mercy, “other”-ness, good heartedness and a thirst for God.

The reward for giving our lives over to God’s love and God’s ways is our beatitude – our happiness, our peace and our joyful satisfaction of a life dedicated to love. This peace and joy perpetuate the cycle of blessings. We bless others and we are once again blessed with a spirit of joy and happiness beyond compare.

God, let it be so. God bless you. Amen.