

“A Bounty of Blessings”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 5:1-16
January 27, 2019
Third Sunday after Epiphany

When we read the beginning of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, we generally jump right in where it starts, with Jesus going up the hillside and speaking to the crowds with the “Blessed are.” If we back up a few verses into chapter 4, we have a better sense of just who is hearing this teaching. Listen now for God’s Word to us from the Gospel according to Matthew:

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. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“Y’all are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. Y’all are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let y’all’s light shine before others, so that they may see y’all’s good works and give glory to y’all’s Father in heaven.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Here is Jesus sitting on a hillside, with his disciples gathered immediately below him, and then, stretching on down the hill, a growing crowd of worn and weary folks who came in search of truth and found that the truth being offered was that they were blessed. And they were salt. And they were light.

When we hear “Blessed are the poor in spirit...those who mourn...the meek...” out of context, it can all seem like an instructional manual: *here’s how to be blessed*.¹ Ah, so if I find a way to be persecuted or reviled, I can get in on this blessing? Or it can simply seem baffling: How, exactly, are these people blessed, Jesus?

I have a hunch that Jesus strayed from his prepared notes in this sermon. I don’t think these blessings were what he came up to this hillside to talk about. Perhaps the blessings he’s doling out aren’t a carefully constructed to-do list, nor a theological treatise, but instead a response to what — to *whom* — he saw around him.

People show up at Edgewood for a variety of reasons on a Sunday morning. They come seeking peace — a refuge from a loud and bitter world. They come to get some little thing to take with them through the week. They come for the music. They come out of habit. They come out of obligation. They come because they are curious. They come to see if there is a community that won’t turn its back on them. They come because to stay at home on a Sunday morning just wouldn’t seem quite right. Perhaps some people come here on Sunday in order to receive a blessing.

I think that’s a big part of why I’m here. The salt and the light here are palpable for me, and I find the blessing you offer irresistible.

I don’t know if anyone on that hillside came to be blessed. But that’s what they got. The blessings poured forth — the declarations, with authority, that God saw them. They were known. They were beloved. They were not alone.

I had a great-aunt named Josie whose superpower was that every single member of our family remains convinced to this day — twenty-five years past her death — that they were the one who had the special relationship with Aunt Josie. She was a witness to your life, your fears, your joys and sorrows. Jesus’s blessings are like that. It’s not quite as famous as feeding five thousand with a few loaves and fishes, but blessing each soul on that hillside with just a few short words is nearly as miraculous.

His words were simple. Yet the blessing was extravagant. This was somehow concise, and yet willy-nilly. We try so hard to follow Jesus, and I wonder if at times we would be wise to start as he started his Sermon on the Mount, lavishing blessings upon one another.

Blessed are the cranky, for we love you anyway.

Blessed are the teachers, for your constant miracles are seen in heaven.

Blessed are the lonely.

Blessed are you when people are nasty to you on the internet and on the interstate.

Blessed are they who at least have the courage to be nasty to you in person.

Blessed are the ones for whom cynicism has replaced hope.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the analog, the pen and paper crowd, the luddites.

Blessed are you when you feel like things have passed you by, for there is a teenager with a patient heart in your midst.

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints*. This entire sermon is indebted to Bolz-Weber. I’m certain she’s not the first pastor who offered a congregation its own beatitudes, but it is hers that inspired these.

Blessed are the experienced, the old,
the ones who have been through storms and whose wisdom is being ignored.
Blessed are the young, the eager, the open-minded, whose hunger to reshape the world is dismissed.
Blessed are you when you are told to speak up or to quiet down.
Blessed are the opinionated.
Blessed are the ones aching to be taken seriously.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the doubters and the agnostics and the ones who clasp belief lightly for fear of squeezing the truth out of it.
Blessed are the teenagers who seem disinterested, but are watching with eagle eyes to see if the adults actually believe any of this stuff or if it's all just a set of lies to keep ourselves from living interesting lives.
Blessed are the kids who take giant chunks of bread at communion and ask the hardest questions these walls can bear and who trust us to lead them well.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the cooks.
Blessed are the ones just getting by who multiply loaves with no fanfare.
Blessed are the worried, for you will be given peace.
Blessed are the heartbroken.
Blessed are the terrified.
Blessed are you when you carry in all of your pockets a heavy grief that you can't share widely but which slows your gait nonetheless.
Blessed are you when it's...very...complicated.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the part-time poets.
Blessed are the nerdy.
Blessed are the meticulous.
Blessed are the messes.
Blessed are you when you are tired and your hair is wild and you are unpresentable.
Blessed are you when you don't care about that and allow yourself to be loved.
Blessed are the achy.
Blessed are the ones who struggle to hear and to see and to understand and to be understood.

Blessed are the weird, for the kingdom of heaven is yours.
Blessed are the cautiously interested who bravely press their noses to the window to see if the followers of Christ have love to spare, despite having been royally burned in the past by people in buildings who lift high the cross.
Blessed are they for whom church has always been a sanctuary.

Blessed are the forgotten.
Blessed are the impatient.
Blessed are the ADHD kids and the OCD kids.
Blessed are the leaders, the followers, and the ones marching in their own parades.

Blessed are the grandparents, for that bond is singular and indescribable.
Blessed are the caregivers.
Blessed are the retirees who find meaning and purpose in the second half of life.

Blessed are the overworked.
Blessed are the under-employed.
Blessed are you when you struggle in such a unique way that you are certain that you are alone.
Blessed are you when you bring blessings and a listening ear.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the ones who quietly bless with no recognition.
Blessed are you when you open your heart to receive a blessing,
for in the receiving you give a sacred gift.

Blessed are you.
Look to your left and your right and before you and behind you, and you will see that the blessings are pouring forth.
There is no shortage.
There is only the deep breath and the strength needed to speak them into the world and the courage required to hear them.
Rejoice and be glad.
Amen.