**November 2, 2014 – All Saints’ Sunday**

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There are a few words in common Christian usage that I really dislike. Among them are “saved,” “tithe,” and “blessed” (or “blessÉD” if you’re feeling VERY pious.) I don’t like “saved” because it’s, overused, misused, and at times used as a club. I don’t like “tithe” because I was frightened by a revival meeting as a child and that word was thrown around a bunch, so it has some bad connotations for me. Besides that, many people don’t know what it even means, so I feel like I have to explain it every time I use it, which is a LOT this time of year. I wish there were a better word for giving back to God a tenth of all we receive, which is what we all should be striving for. (Notice how I neatly inserted stewardship in there?)

But I REALLY hate the word, “blessed!” Talk about an overused word! Especially on the Internet!

“Just got our brand new Lexus – feeling so blessed!”

“Feeling really blessed to have a job right now, when so many are out of work.”

“Muffy just got into Harvard – what a blessing!”

“We are so blessed in this country, compared to Africa (or India, or South America, or anywhere there are poor people.)”

And my personal, all-time NOT favorite, “Hashtag SOblessed!”

You get the picture. But why is this so bad? Didn’t I just get through saying that God has given us everything, and surely we should be acknowledging that, right? Well yes…and no.

Scott Dannemiller, a former Presbyterian missionary, writes about this. First of all, he says;

When [we] say that [our] material fortune is the result of God's blessing, it reduces The Almighty to some sort of sky-bound, wish-granting fairy who spends his days randomly bestowing cars and cash upon his followers.

Second, and more importantly, he says:

[C]alling myself blessed because of material good fortune is just plain *wrong*. For starters, it can be offensive to the hundreds of millions of Christians in the world who live on less than $10 per day. You read that right. *Hundreds of millions* who receive a single-digit dollar "blessing" per day.

This kind of thinking about blessing leads us very quickly into the prosperity gospel mindset, where if we just pray hard enough we’ll be blessed by God, which in this case means we’ll be well off and comfortable, unlike those non-blessed poor people, who obviously aren’t doing it right.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount from today’s Gospel, certainly doesn’t say that being blessed equates to being comfortable. In fact, far from it. Like agape from last week’s sermon, this kind of blessing requires action – not on the part of the blesser but on the part of the one being blessed. It means following Christ down a certain path, but it also means the opposite – NOT heading down an alternative path.

The Beatitudes only appear in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Luke’s version is much shorter, with only four blessings, but it then goes on to counter those four with four matching woes. I thought it was kind of a shame that Matthew didn’t use Luke’s spin on the Beatitudes, too, so I’m going to redress that deficiency right now by stating some possible woes to go with the blessings.

Unlike Luke, who definitely states the outcomes of the woes, what I’m not going to do is determine the results of each of my woes – first of all because I’m not Jesus, and second of all because I actually started to do just that and it felt WAY too good. So I’m going to leave that up to God.

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

The word used for “poor” here is “*ptochos*.” It can mean living in poverty, but Matthew adds the words, “in spirit” so that we won’t mistake his meaning. In this context, it comes closer to the original sense of the word, which is to crouch or cower before someone. Another way of saying this could be, “blessed are the humble before God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

And the opposite might be, “Woe to those who are spiritually arrogant, or who are pretentious or ostentatious in their prayers.” I know a few people who fit that bill.

**"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”**

Oh this is a good one. It seems pretty straightforward on the surface, but the word for mourn – “*pentheo*” – has another meaning besides grieving or lamenting. It also means to feel guilt about something you’ve done.

So the shadow side of this beatitude might be, “Woe to those who cause others to mourn by their actions, but who feel no guilt about it.

**"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”**

The word that’s translated as “meek” is “*praus*.” This is not a milque toast, weakling kind of meek, but rather it means exercising strength under God’s control. It’s like a mother lion carrying her cubs in her mouth – the strength to kill is there, but it’s under the control of gentleness and love.

The opposite of this could be, “Woe to those who use their greater strength to hurt others without compunction, and for whom gentleness is seen as a failing.”

**"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”**

The sense here of hungering and thirsting is that God’s righteousness, his justice and mercy, are the only food that will keep us truly alive.

So the woe here might be, “Woe to those who only think of themselves, for whom the satisfactions of the world are all they desire, and for whom justice and mercy equal weakness.”

**"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”**

The Greek word for mercy is “eleémon,” which means mercy, but also compassion and pity. It comes with a sense of empathy and the ability to put ourselves in someone less fortunate’s shoes.

It’s the opposite of indifferent. “Woe to those who are cruel to those who are weaker than they are and merciless to those who are in their power, and to whom the suffering of others means nothing.”

**"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”**

This is more than mere innocence. This is recognizing sin, but instead choosing to be purified by God. This is living in the world, but not of the world.

“Woe to those who consider a conscience is to be a liability, and who will sell their soul, or God, to the highest bidder.”

**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”**

These peacemakers are not merely passive pacifists. They are the creators of peace – the Mahatma Gandhis, the Desmond Tutus, the Martin Luther King, Jrs. And often, they are killed for it.

Just War Theory, Misinterpreted Second Amendment rights, Stand Your Ground, militarized police forces – these are the opposite of making peace. “Woe to those who profit from killing other people, especially in the name of nationalism.”

**"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

The word for persecuted here means more than just being picked on or bullied. It’s someone who is actively hunted down and punished or killed for their beliefs. It’s hatred and intolerance in action.

“Woe to the hunters and killers of righteousness, and woe to those who merely stand by and do nothing while justice and mercy are trampled on.”

And then finally, we get to:

**"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.”**

Up until this point, Jesus was using the sentence construction, “blessed are THOSE.” Blessed are the theoretical people who fall into this or that category. But with this last verse, he switches subjects of the sentence. “Blessed are YOU,” he says, speaking directly to his disciples.

And since Matthew is all about discipleship, he’s also speaking directly to us. We are sort of lucky, living as we do in 21st century America. Chances are, unless we move to some terrorist-controlled part of the world, we’re not going to get in any trouble by merely calling ourselves Christians.

However, if our actions truly show that we are living our lives according to this list of Beatitudes, there is a really good chance that we will be reviled and persecuted and trash talked right here in our own back yard.

If we’re humble before God, if we comfort the mourners and protect the meek, if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, if we are unrestrainedly merciful and pure in heart, and above all if we pursue peace at any cost, we WILL be hated and persecuted.

The opposite is, “Woe to you who are not willing to risk everything for my sake, and woe to you who care more about reputation and prestige than about the Gospel.”

Is that what we want to do? Because now is the time to decide. Whose side are we on – God’s side or the world’s side? In listing these Beatitudes, Jesus is asking us to choose. Fence sitting and trying to play both ends against the middle won’t work now, any more than it did in Jesus’ time.

Do you choose God, or money? Do you choose God, or comfort? Do you choose God, or safety?

Today we’re celebrating All Saints’ Day and all those who went before us and sacrificed everything for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They chose God rather than money, comfort, or even safety. And now, today, we get to choose whether to follow the example they set for us. Today we get to choose God and be blessed.

Amen.