

Sermon 1 29 17

What does it mean to be blessed? There are all sorts of descriptions in the Bible, but it's confusing --- conflicting reports etc. Perhaps this is this one of those things - "You'll know it when it happens to you?"

Our readings start out today with the prophet Micah giving the people of Israel the opportunity to repent of their sins. Apparently they had been "busy." They had reverted to worshipping idols - again - and they were taking advantage of the poor among them. The wealthy, under the guise of offering protection, were seizing land, appropriating it for their own use. They were engaging in dishonest trade practices and just generally behaving very badly. Micah made a point of saying that God wasn't asking for much for their sins. When they finally were so sorry that they were apparently ready to sacrifice their first-born children, God reminded them that they already knew what they had to do: "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God."

Ohhhh, that must have irked them. They were looking for the grand gesture - sacrificing hundreds of rams, for example. But no - God was asking for the far more difficult: to do justice, to learn to love being kind, and to walk with humility with God. How very irritating! How very difficult.

And speaking of irritating, then we are offered Psalm 15 for our instruction! That's where God tells us to lead blameless lives, do right, and always tell the truth from our hearts. Oh great, that's easy! Come down here and live in the real world God! Oh wait, God created the real world. We don't tell God what the world is like. God tells us.

Paul faced all of this in his letter to the Corinthians. He showed the reader/us that Jesus coming among us turned the world upside down. The first thing to note is that for Paul, in this writing, the word "wisdom" had to do with our brains, with intellect only. Many of us, myself included, also equate wisdom with an instinct for the good, for God. But when Paul asked about the wisdom of the "wise," he was talking only about brain power. The wisdom of the so-called "wise" just isn't. Paul maintained that we don't know God by way of our intellect. We know God by faith. God looks for our faith, not our reason. And the "wise," the intellects of the world, see that as foolishness. Paul was telling us that the wisdom of God is so far beyond our so-called "wisdom" that we could only come to know God through Jesus Christ, who exemplifies God's wisdom.

Even more to the point, Paul asked his followers to each consider their own calls to the Way of Jesus Christ. They didn't come to Jesus by human power, by social standing, or human wisdom. They came to Jesus by faith. God reached across the boundaries of society, to pull the low and the great together, to worship together, to live together as brothers and sisters. This was revolutionary. *It is* revolutionary.

Jesus taught us with the Sermon on the Mount. He knew he was talking to the poor, the disenfranchised. He was talking to the people who go to St. Andrew's in Camden, not the wealthy who occasionally parade through the National Cathedral. He knew the sorrows of the poor and disenfranchised.

Jesus knew what it meant to be poor in spirit, depressed and hopeless. His people lived in slavery to Rome.

He offered comfort to those who mourned, who lived with violent death as an everyday occurrence.

He knew that for self-preservation his people had to conduct their lives eyes down, with subservience, with meekness.

He knew that his people did not experience justice, righteousness, even though they were starved for it. They would always lose to the Romans. And yet, he asked his people to show mercy. He asked them, in the face of the desperate unfairness of their lives, to somehow maintain their humanity, to show mercy, to keep their ability to love, and most important in their desperate situation, to continue to be peacemakers in the face of horrible violence, in the face of both deliberate and off-hand persecution.

Jesus knew that his followers would be persecuted. They quietly challenged the bedrock laws and beliefs of an empire.

300 years later, when Constantine converted and the empire became Christian, all that changed. Roman Christianity became the law of the land and we all got quite comfy for a couple of thousand years. Perhaps we got too comfy – too comfy with Christian privilege. Too comfy to really think and consider what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

It's hard to be a Christian – it's supposed to be hard. Try following the Beatitudes for a week. It's hard. It's about impossible idealistic stuff. It's about loving our neighbors no matter what because God loves us no matter what. This is not click your heels together three times and whoop! you're in heaven stuff. This is about yeah, we get to go to heaven

no matter what but Jesus asks a lot of us here and now. For one thing, we don't get to pick and choose our neighbors. Everyone is our neighbor. To love everyone – that's hard. Especially when it's much easier to be angry at everyone.

And what does it mean to be blessed? Being blessed seems to me to make being a Christian worthwhile. But what does it mean to be blessed?

Oh, I did a lot of reading on this. And I came up with a lot of definitions you might expect. To be blessed is to be "Made holy; consecrated." To be blessed is to be "endowed with divine favor and protection," to be "an extension of God's grace." Well, that's all well and good – sounds lovely, but how does it work? How does it happen?

And then I read something – and I can't remember where so I can't attribute it. Being blessed happens with receiving Jesus' "inbirthings of faith." There's a new word for you "*inbirthings*." I'd never heard that one before – "*inbirthings*." To receive Jesus' inbirthings of faith. Faith born within us that is a gift from Jesus. There's something to pray for! It's an answer to that poor man's prayer, "I believe. Help my unbelief!" "Dear Jesus, fill me with your inbirthings of faith!" "Let faith be born and grow and live in me!"

You see, we have so much. We need so little that we truly believe we need so little. An Australian visiting Africa was speaking with an African Christian who said, "It must be so hard to be a Christian in Australia." The Australian asked what he meant. The man responded, "*You have so much it must be hard to depend on God.*"

I think the same could be said of us. Are we truly willing, with all we have, to depend on God?

Being blessed is beyond our control. It's a passive experience. It's not something we do; it's something we receive. We can't bless ourselves. With blessing, we receive from God, at God's discretion. We can ask God to bless us. To be blessed has to do with our souls, our inner being, having a sense of wellbeing, contentment. At the most basic level it involves feeling that we are living in harmony with God.

This is how those early Christians were able to face torture and death. This is how they found peace. *They lived in a state of blessed resurrection all the time.*

We have good lives. Have we been seduced by them? Let's ask ourselves... Can we *know*, can we experience dependence on God? Can we know and trust in ourselves Jesus' gift – the inbirthing of faith?