

January 29, 2017
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are who?

Blessed are..., these words are the first words Jesus speaks in his Sermon on the Mount. This is the beginning of Jesus' instructions on how to be his disciple and what it means to follow him. These are the first things Jesus teaches us in the gospel of Matthew. And first things being first, we need to pay attention. He begins with what? Blessing. Blessing for who? Well, that's where it gets interesting.

Blessed are... This is how Jesus kicks off his public ministry in the gospel of Matthew. It's his first public action and it's important that we notice that. Because in each of the gospels, Jesus' first public action is different. Each gospel makes a slightly different statement about who Jesus is and what he has come to do. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus' first public action is casting out a demon. Because in Mark's gospel, Jesus has come to overcome evil and set us free from the power of darkness and death. In Luke's gospel, Jesus' first public action is to preach a sermon in his hometown, in which he lifts up the poor and the oppressed, and then nearly gets himself thrown off a cliff. Because in

Luke's gospel, Jesus has come to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. And in the gospel of John, Jesus's first public action is to turn water into wine at a wedding. Because in John's gospel, Jesus has come to start a party. And like wine, he will be poured out so that we may have life abundant. And in the gospel of Matthew, where we are today, Jesus' first public action is teaching. Because in Matthew, Jesus is not just a nice guy or a miracle worker. He is the guy with the answers. Above all else, first and foremost, he is our teacher, our Rabbi, our instructor in the faith. And we, as his disciples, are first and foremost, his students.

Jesus begins his ministry in Matthew's gospel by teaching. And his first lesson begins today with a blessing. That's the first thing that jumps out at me today. That Jesus begins his instruction by talking about what God is in favor of. About by encouraging his disciples to believe they are favored by God.

Jesus begins by talking about who is blessed. Makarios is the word in Greek. It means fortunate. It means lucky and privileged. It means you're gonna be ok. Everything will be fine because God is on your side.

You are blessed. Isn't it interesting that Jesus starts here? And that he teaches us to start here too, with blessing? Because it's not always where we start, is it? It's not always our first impulse to think of what God favors. To look for what is good or where God might be at work. It's not our first inclination to look at things with hope. Instead, we tend to start with despair and blame. And what needs to be fixed. And which people are wrong. And how they are wrong. And why they are wrong. And would you just look at all the wrong, wrong, wrong. We tend to start there. And Jesus could have started there. He could have started out talking about all the things he was against and the people he was against. He could have started out there because that's an easy place to start. With, woe is me. And woe to you. And woe to all of us for all that is wrong in the world. But Jesus did not begin his teaching with a tirade about troubles and trials and who in the world is cursed and who is terrible. No, he talks about who is blessed. And he teaches us to start there too. He teaches us to start with what is right. To start with what is good. To look for what God favors. Because it is there. It is there for us. First of all, above all else, God is a God of blessing.

It's nice to hear that, isn't it? That Jesus comes, first of all, to teach us about God's blessing. To show us where God's heart is, not where it isn't. To help us learn that there is blessing for you and for me, no matter how rotten life might be. It's nice to hear that because we don't often hear that. Because we don't often feel blessed, do we? We don't often feel lucky. We don't feel special or that we have God's favor. And it would be nice if we could feel that way. If we knew that God was looking out for us. That things would be all right. Because God is on our side, because God is for us, not against us; that we are blessed. Wouldn't that be good news? I would say yes. I would say if we all learned today that God wants to bless us that would be enough.

But there's more to Jesus' first lesson today. There's more to it than a blanket blessing for everyone. These blessings are very specific. That's the second thing I notice about Jesus' teaching today. He is saying, pay attention. These people have God's attention. These people have God's favor. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek and the merciful and the pure in heart. Blessed are those who are grieving.

Blessed are those who are persecuted. Blessed are those who long for

peace; who need righteousness so badly they can taste it. Blessed are those people. These are the people who are favored by God.

Jesus' first lesson might be a bit shocking to us. It would have been shocking to those who first heard it. To those living in the Greco-Roman world in the 1st century, where having the favor of the gods meant you had wealth and health. You had honor and prestige. You a seat in the Senate and a villa at the sea. You had it all because you were blessed by the gods. And you had divine blessed, everyone knew, because you had it all.

And some would tell you the same today. Even some religious folks.

They will tell you that those who are prosperous are blessed. Those who are well-off and well-to-do. Blessed are the successful, blessed are the CEOs, blessed are the professional athletes and the Oscar nominees.

Blessed are those who have inherited islands in the Caribbean. Blessed are those who have live-in cooks and maids. Blessed are those who have it all and have it in abundance.

But what Jesus teaches us today is the opposite of all of that. He teaches us that those favored by God are not those who have it all, but for those

who have almost nothing. It's not with those with their own kingdoms, but those with no place to call their own. These are the ones who are blessed. Pay attention, Jesus says. Pay attention, says the apostle Paul. That's what he is telling his church in Corinth today; to pay attention. To not get swept up in the superficial preferences of the world. To not think that God belongs to the smart and the superior and the powerful. Pay attention, says Paul. God does not favor the strong or the spectacular. God favors the weak. God is on the side of those who suffer. Remember what you have learned about God in Jesus Christ. Remember how he spent his life. With fishermen and illicit women and traitors and zealots and widows, and children and the sick and the mentally ill. In Jesus Christ, God was with the nowhere people in nowhere places. Places like manglers and wildernesses and crosses and graves. God was with the lifeless and the unlucky and the unfortunate. Because those are the places and those are the people that need God the most.

Pay attention. It doesn't make sense, Paul says, I know, but God chose what is foolish. God chose what is weak. God chose what is low and despised, so that no one may boast. So that the cursed may be blessed, so

the unloved may be loved, so the unwelcome may feel at home. So that God's creation may be restored. All of God's creation.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek and the merciful and the pure in heart, and those who are grieving, and those who are persecuted. Blessed are those who long for peace; those who need righteousness so badly they can taste it. Blessed are those who need life to be different. Who long for life to be more than it is. Pay attention; look at the cross, Paul says. Listen to my words, Jesus says. Listen and learn. Blessed are those in need. Blessed are those without. Blessed are you when you experience this for yourself. You will, we all will. We only know God's strength when we are weak. When we are out of luck, and someone steps in. When we are lost and someone gives us directions. When we are thirsty and someone gives us a drink. When we are cold and someone gives us a coat. When we are a stranger in a strange land and someone welcomes us. When someone criticizes us for blessing the least of these as Jesus did. When we have lost everything and we have nothing left but God. As it may happen to others, it may happen to us. That's why Jesus says this to us. That's why he talks about

this first with his disciples. Because they will experience these things as his followers. Because of who Jesus is and what will happen to him, we need to be prepared. Because there will be times when we are poor in spirit. When we will mourn. When we will long for justice and mercy and peace. When we will feel meek and small and persecuted. When the darkness seems too powerful and we will have nothing left but a singular hope that God is still God. That we WILL be filled and that we WILL be comforted and that the Kingdom of God will be ours. Remember, FOR YOUR OWN SAKE, for the sake of those around you, that God does not leave you when you are poor or sad or broken. That is when God is with you the most. You have God's favor. You are lucky. You are blessed.

This is Jesus' first lesson for us and for all disciples in all times and places about who we are and why we are here. And that we are blessed. Not because we have it all together, but because God has it all together. We are blessed not because the world loves us. But because God does. We are blessed not because we are healthy and well-off but because when we aren't, we are just as worthy of God's grace. And being

disciples of Jesus, following him, learning from him, means listening to him. It means paying attention to those whom he pays attention to.

Favoring those whom he favors. It's learning to see a different kind of blessing among us. The kind that's not about what we have, but about who has us.

Blessed are you, Jesus says, if you are here today, frazzled and frustrated, for you will have hope. Blessed are you if you are here today, and you miss someone so much you can hardly stand it, for you will have comfort. Blessed are you if you are full of sorrow and regret, for you will find peace. Blessed are you if you are feeling powerless to change things in the world, for you will find God at work. Blessed are you if you are wishing you had more faith, for you will find the assurance that things will be OK. Blessed are you if you are feeling too young or too old or too fast or too slow or too perfect or too messed up to get through life by yourself, for you will find that God is with you.

God favors you. Because God has chosen what is foolish, what is weak, what is low and despised. God has chosen to work blessings through all

of that. In our powerlessness, we will experience the power of God. Just as Jesus taught us.