

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 2, 2014
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 37:1-18
I Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

We are all aware of the old cliché which states: “familiarity breeds contempt.” Well, in today’s Gospel lesson we are faced with a potential situation where familiarity may not breed contempt, but it may impede our ability to actually hear what Jesus may be saying.

In the early stages of his public ministry, the word is getting out and Jesus’ preaching and teaching is beginning to “go viral.” One day, Matthew tells us, Jesus climbs up a mountainside, and as the crowds and his disciples gather in, he sits down and begins to teach them.

What comes forth, of course, is the “famous” Sermon on the Mount. And it is the beginning portion, the material from our text today, where the old bugaboo of familiarity may try to impede our progress a bit. More specifically, it is our familiarity with one word that may be the problem. That word: *blessed*.

What does this word really mean?

This word is deeply ingrained into our religious vocabulary. But what *exactly* does it mean?

If I gave you a piece of paper and asked you to write what it means to be blessed, what would you write? Or better yet, if one of your non-churchgoing friends asked you what a blessing is, or what it means to be blessed, what would you tell them?

If you find it a bit difficult to “pin down” a precise meaning for this term, you are not alone. Truth be told, the Greek term which the English translates “blessing” is very elusive, very difficult to translate at points.

In some cases the term has been translated: *happy, fortunate, well-off*. In more traditional settings it has been rendered as: *special favor, unique standing, permission, empowerment, and endowment*.

But this little word is important, because as Jesus climbs the mountain and begins to teach, we get a sense that we are into something really significant. This teaching is not some low fat, low carb, reduced calorie sermonette. It’s as if Jesus sits down and says: “Let me explain to you all why I have come, and *the kind of people for whom* I have come.” And the kind of folks for whom Jesus has come he gives the title *blessed*.

Let’s be clear here. This is not some vapid power point sermon about “the secrets to a happy and successful life.” This is not a formula for how to live your best life now. This is not a bullet list of things *toward* which we should strive or *to which* we should aspire. There are no commands here. No imperatives.

Jesus is speaking in the indicative here. He is speaking about qualities and characteristics that exist *right now, in the present*. Jesus is not saying, “you need to become poor in spirit.” He is not saying, “you need to become pure in heart, or hunger for justice, or work at making peace.” He is affirming that where you find folks like that, that is where you will also find *him*, because he has cast his lot with those kinds of people. God’s favor rests on them. God’s empowerment is with them. They are, in a word.....*blessed*.

But when you look at the kinds of people Jesus pronounces blessing on here, you might be justified in asking the question: *Why these people?* Take a good, hard look. The people Jesus mentions here are certainly NOT the people that society considers blessed. Modern culture defines blessing in terms of happiness, wealth, fame, pedigree, and power.

But the people Jesus mentions here don’t seem to fit that category.

It’s hard for me to define what is meant by “poor in spirit,” but I can assure you that I know what it *does not* mean. It does not refer to someone who is *having a bad day*. It’s hard to quantify poor in spirit, but I know it when I see it, and so do you. When you look into a person’s eyes and you see deep enough to see that their soul is on life support and that all hope is gone, you know.

It’s difficult to quantify what it means to *mourn*, because it goes so much deeper than grieving the loss of persons that we love. Persons mourn the loss of

dreams they surrendered years ago in order to “pay the bills” or conform to someone else’s expectations. Adults mourn the loss of the innocence that was violently taken from them when they were children. We mourn the atrocities of war and the human carnage it leaves behind. For many people, life is one extended season of grief.

As a white North American male, it is extremely difficult for me to know what it means to hunger and thirst for justice. But I don’t have to go far to meet people who do.

These kinds of people are definitely not the types of people that society would typically classify as “blessed.” But Jesus says that they are. Why? Perhaps Jesus is reminding us that God regularly shows up in places we least expect, and in people who are broken and vulnerable.

And it is often in our moments of disappointment, grief, and despair that we let go of cultural notions of blessing (wealth, fame, power, and all of that) and open ourselves up to the presence of God who gives without asking in return and blesses us – not because of something we did or might do – but simply because of who we are.

One scholar has written that the culture into which Jesus was born was a culture driven predominantly by the twin pillars of honor and shame. Jesus, he argues, defied both of those cultural norms by offering *blessing*. What Jesus

offered people was the sense that they were not alone, that they had the capacity to rise above their present circumstances, that they were more than the sum of their parts or past experiences. Jesus offered them blessing, the sense that they had real worth. You get a sense from watching Jesus that *blessing was not something that could be pursued, but rather something that could only be received as a gift.* (David

Lose, *WorkingPreacher.org*, January 27, 2014)

So, we come full circle to this one simple word: *Blessed*. Hard to define. Difficult to quantify. Easily distorted by a culture bent on status, wealth, power, and control. But given by Jesus to those who are broken, vulnerable, and all too human.

In a moment, we will come to the Table. As we do, I'm going to ask you to do something a bit out of the ordinary. As you come to the Table, open your heart and allow God to *bless* you. Receive His promise to comfort you, to heal you, to endow you with power over an obstacle in your life. Hear and receive His blessing as addressed specifically to you. Allow His blessing to wash over you and to settle deep into your soul. Then rise up, go forth, and extend His blessing to others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.