

2-25-18 Sermon – “Changing the Meaning of Blessed” – Mark 8:31-38

I don't think I have many pet peeves...but the pet peeves I do have – let's just say I feed them very well. And one pet peeve that gets me every time is the way that we as American Christians carelessly toss around the word 'blessed.'

There's the couple marveling at the returns on their stock portfolio who exclaim, "Wow, we've really been blessed!" Or the high schooler who tweets, "Parents got me a brand-new car for my birthday! #blessed!" Or the youth pastor who returns from a mission trip and says to her spouse, "You know, that week in Haiti really reminded me how blessed we are to live in this country."

This flippant use of the word 'blessed' gets to me because it leads us toward some dangerous theological ground. It grows out of a modern-day heresy – a distortion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ called the prosperity gospel.

In a nutshell, the prosperity gospel says that if you pray to God and give money to the church, God will give you whatever you want. The more you pray, and the more you give, the more God will 'bless' you with health, money, and power.

If you are rich, powerful, and 'making it' in the world, you clearly are someone who has been blessed by God. And if you are sick, poor, or facing hardship of any kind...well, according to the prosperity gospel, you must not be a very good Christian.

You can see, I'm sure, how this 'prosperity gospel' is problematic. We who live in this world *know* that bad things happen to good people. We know that the way the way life works isn't always fair. We know faithful people who have suffered more than anyone's fair share of hardship.

And, the fact of the matter is, this prosperity gospel, this mis-construal of what it means to be 'blessed' is completely contrary to what Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel reading.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus tells the crowds, "Let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

So much for health, wealth, and happiness. In contrast to the picture painted by the prosperity gospel, Jesus is not some divine Oprah, seated on the heavenly throne going, "You get a car, and you get a car, and you get a car!" No, the Jesus we meet in Holy Scripture has a much more sobering message. He offers his followers the path of self-denial, and the way of the cross.

"You want to talk about blessing?" Jesus asks us. "Lay down your life, and then you will begin to see what blessing really looks like."

Of course, there's also danger in swinging too far in the other direction. Let me be abundantly clear: Jesus does *not* call us to suffer just for suffering's sake. This *equally* disturbing distortion of the Gospel has kept far too many people – usually women – in violent homes or abusive relationships, being told that they should willingly suffer their spouse's violence just as Jesus willingly suffered on the cross.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The God we meet in Jesus Christ is neither a divine Santa Claus, nor an abusive partner. God loves us and *does* bless us – abundantly – every day. It's just that God's definition of 'blessing' looks a little different than we might expect.

Some context for Jesus' teaching is helpful. When we twenty-first century Christians think of crosses, we think of Jesus. But for the crowds to whom Jesus preached, a cross was a common symbol – and not of Christianity, but of the certain and painful death of anyone who dared to oppose the Roman Empire. The Romans put up crosses the way we put up highway

billboards. They reminded everyone who saw them that Caesar was lord. And if you dare to disagree...well, let your death on a cross be an example and a warning to everyone else.

Jesus says, "Take up your cross. Proclaim my gospel anyway."

Jesus teaches all who will hear that Christian discipleship requires something of us. It requires ultimate allegiance and unwavering commitment to the Gospel. Following Jesus means we are called to deny ourselves, to abandon our natural instincts of survival and self-preservation, and give ourselves entirely to the love and justice of Jesus Christ. That even as the cross looms over us in warning, we are to proclaim – with our words and with our *lives* – that Jesus is Lord.

This is what it means to be Christ's disciple. This, Jesus says, is what it means to be blessed.

The crosses that we carry may not be as big or as dramatic as the cross Jesus carried. But there's more than one way to lay down one's life for the sake of the Gospel. Where, in our lives today, do we see people laying down that instinct for self-preservation and giving themselves fully to love of God and neighbor. Where are the places where we are called to say, "Not my will, but *thy* will be done?"

Dr. Lamar Williamson, former New Testament professor at my seminary in Richmond, points to the woman who spends her life fostering children in need of a home. Or the man who faithfully cares for a wife as she struggles with mental illness. Or the young businessman who puts his reputation on the line and engages in nonviolent civil disobedience that he knows very well may land him in jail. Perhaps today, it's the high school student who risks being suspended in order to participate in the "March for our Lives" National Student Walkout this March 24th.

These unsung heroes, Williamson says, "are among countless thousands, who through the centuries and in many contexts have interpreted the text by their lives."¹ People who have in one way or another laid down their lives for their neighbors. Disciples of Jesus Christ who have become a blessing to others and in doing so, are blessed.

We are blessed by being a blessing. That's the paradox of Jesus' teaching. It is only when we take up our crosses and empty ourselves, that we receive the joy and blessing of truly abundant life, that life which only Christ can give.

God says to Abraham, "Leave your life behind and follow me. And I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing. And in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Or as my Hebrew professor, Rev. Dr. Carson Brisson, would say at the end of every single class:

"May joy, and nothing less, find you on the way. May you be blessed, and oh may you *be* a blessing. And may light – Love's own crucified, risen Light – guide you and countless others all the way home. Shalom."

¹ Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Mark*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1983. p. 156-157.