

4 Epiphany January 29, 2017

Bless Your Heart

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Last summer I did a wedding here at Church of the Good Shepherd for a couple whose names are Lindsey and Robert. Lindsey was a choral scholar with us back when she and Robert were students at OU, and when they decided to get married, even though they had other options for venues, they wanted to return to a parish where they had felt spiritual growth, had truly received a blessing and wanted to have that same kind of blessed environment when they said their wedding vows.

The day of their wedding was indeed a beautiful, life-giving day, and those of us who participated and helped had the joy of meeting the families and friends of the couple. I particularly remember a conversation with one of the bridesmaids who had never been to Athens or Southern Ohio before. The bridesmaid told me about a phrase she heard that she had never heard before she visited this area, a phrase I am sure most of you are familiar with, "bless your heart." When the bridesmaid heard this phrase, she thought it sounded like a lovely thing to say to someone, and interpreted it to mean an exceptionally gracious way to say thank you. So, she started saying it to everyone: to the servers at restaurants, to the staff at the hotel she was staying at, to the person who did her hair for the wedding, and to her friends. Every time she said, "bless your heart," she thought she was being kind by conveying a blessing to the person she spoke to.

Then she told me how her friends who are more familiar with this area corrected her by telling her the phrase "bless your heart" isn't what it might sound like. Her friends told her that phrase isn't a form of blessing, honor, or gracious thanks, instead it is sort of a back handed way of saying a person might be good intentioned, but doesn't really know what they are doing. The poor bridesmaid felt bad and at the same time she laughed at herself for the irony she saw in the situation where she was unintentionally insulting the very people she wanted to thank by using a phrase she didn't understand.

The concept of blessings, or being blessed, can be confusing. Perhaps some of you are familiar with stories from the Old Testament, such as the story of Jacob and his brother Esau, where a patriarch would bestow his blessing on one of his children. This blessing was understood to be the sort of thing God was involved in,

even though it was invoked by the father, and was meant to convey a “transmission of the power for life”, as the eloquent scholar Walter Bruggeman describes blessings in his book *Reverberations of Faith*. This blessing inferred material as well as spiritual wellbeing to the person who received it, and it was powerful enough to be passed down from generation to generation.

Others of you might be familiar with the priestly blessings of the Old Testament, the words of which are still spoken by Christian priests such as myself to this day, as part of the priesthood is to bestow or give blessings of peace and comfort to God’s people. Such a blessing is not understood as a wish, but is the actual conveyance of God’s peace and “power for life” to an individual or community.

Both kinds of blessings were and are not given lightly, but seriously with thoughtful intention. Such blessings are not an excuse, they are a gift and assurance of God’s grace.

Then there are the blessings we heard in our Gospel this morning, which might add another aspect to the wonderful mystery of blessings. Our Gospel this morning is the beginning of a long, uninterrupted speech given by Jesus often called “The Sermon on the Mount”, because we heard Jesus first went up a mountain and sat down before he started talking. And his long talk began with the list of proclaiming who is blessed by God, often referred to as “the Beatitudes”.

The word used in the original Greek manuscripts we translate “blessed” can also be translated “honored” or “happy”. And when we look at the list of people Jesus claimed are blessed, honored, or happy, there seems to be some confusion. Jesus didn’t name the sort of people conventional wisdom usually calls honorable or happy: the healthy, the wealthy, the worldly wise, the eloquent, the self-sufficient, the ones in positions of power. Instead Jesus named some things you or I might be inclined to avoid or prevent instead of aspire to: things like being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, being merciful, being persecuted. Jesus also named some things we might want to aspire to, but are not easy to live into: like being hungry for justice (which I am pretty sure means God’s justice), being pure in heart, which is pretty hard to do in this day and age when even the kindest among us can have their cynical moments.

Not only did Jesus list the kind of people conventional wisdom does not usually celebrate, but he named consequences that do not usually go with their condition. For example, while many of us might try our darnedest to comfort someone who is mourning, most of the time the best those who grieve can do is to learn how to live with a loss. It is hard to think of an example where a meek person inherited anything of value, let alone ruled the countries of the earth; conventional wisdom tells us meekness is not as asset when it comes to leadership.

Of course, there are plenty of commentators who try to help make these beatitudes less confusing. One way commentators or scholars have tried to have these blessings make sense is to say that the results Jesus was talking about, like the meek inheriting the earth or the mourners receiving comfort are things that will only happen in heaven, after a person has died. Unfortunately, I have heard of this interpretation used to keep people in abusive situations or conditions like poverty, which I do not believe is what Jesus was promoting when he pronounced his list of the blessed. It seems to me, when a person tries to make the beatitudes make sense with conventional wisdom, they miss the whole point, and can end up unintentionally saying the wrong thing, like the poor bridesmaid did this summer.

Jesus was naming who is already blessed by God as a way of describing what it looks like when God's Kingdom and earth come together. As we heard in Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth in our second reading today, such a marvelous union may look confusing, or foolish, or not make sense to those who hold with conventional wisdom instead of God's wisdom, as Jesus seems to be saying God bestows the "power for life" to those who perhaps need it the most even when conventional wisdom might not believe such people deserve it. This is just another way Jesus is proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom coming near, and how heaven and earth meet in the people God loves: the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, those who not only hunger but also thirst for God's righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and even those who are persecuted, in fact Jesus even mentioned that persecution bit twice.

This list isn't just those who God loves, it is also a way every person who follows Jesus can learn to recognize the blessed among us, to let the blessed help us all grow closer to God, and to learn to not be afraid of living unconventional to worldly wisdom and instead live into the way of life that God blesses, so that we can be a blessing to others and help share the "power for life" we have received.

What might living such a blessed life look like? It might look like refraining from anger and vengeance and offering forgiveness instead. It might look like refraining from blaming political parties or other groups of people. It might look like naming fears then learning to manage them instead of allowing fears to dictate choices. Living a blessed life might mean speaking the truth, not just opinion, and being brave enough to know the difference.

These are just a few ways, there are more, and you know will know which way God is calling you to live, and it also important to remember that such ways may not be understood or accepted by everyone. I have friends who sometimes tell me I must “pick sides”, and call me names when I tell them neither side they offer is acceptable to me. We are still friends because we have learned to see each other as larger than just what side of a fence we sit on, that we still have other things, larger things in common, like our faith in God, and how we strive to answer to God’s call daily.

That is just another example of how the blessed among us can help us all recognize the ways we are connected to God and live God’s kingdom, despite any differences. And how any person, and any place, even all of us here in this place, can be blessed, can be where heaven and earth meet, and God’s love and blessing can be shared, on Sundays, on wedding days, on funeral days, and even ordinary days.