

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 41:11-13  
SECOND LESSON: Luke 6:20-31  
November 6, 2022

***“A Strange Kind of Blessing”***  
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A minister was once preaching on the same text we read from this morning. His focus was forgiving enemies. Toward the end of the service, he asked his congregation, “how many of you have forgiven your enemies”? This was a Baptist Church. They were used to the call and response kind of sermon. About half held up their hands. He then repeated his question. He had already preached for a long time and it was past lunchtime, so this time about 80 percent held up their hands. He then repeated his question again. All responded, except one little old lady.

“Mrs. Jones?” asked the minister, “Are you not willing to forgive your enemies?”

“I don’t have any.” she replied. smiling sweetly.

“Mrs. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?”

“Ninety-three,” she replied.

“Oh Mrs. Jones,” said the minister, “what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are. Would you please come down in front of this congregation and tell us all how a person can live ninety-three years and not have an enemy in the world.”

She cranked open her walker and tottered down the aisle, faced the congregation, and said “I outlived the old hags.”

Please forgive me if I’ve shared that one before. I just never tire of it!

In the sermon on the plain, a sermon with close parallels to the sermon on the mount, Jesus announces four blessings and four woes, before he deals with the issue of enemies. But the idea of a blessing has been subtly transformed these days. People with no faith at all now use the term.

“Blessings” have become code for material goods. We are also “blessed” with good health, a good marriage, a career, children. The prosperity gospel if anything has just reinforced the idea that being blessed means having wealth and physical things. And the problem is, there are scriptures that appear to back this up. The Old Testament seems to clearly identify blessings with prosperity. But God’s blessings have always been both physical and spiritual.

Because the word “blessing” has been watered down and misrepresented it’s important to find out what it really means, and the most insightful definition I found was that to be blessed was to be “unburdened” or “satisfied.” This draws us away from the concept of having “stuff” to the emotional and spiritual state of being at peace. When we are blessed we are not running

around looking to get more “blessings.” There’s no greed in “blessed.” Neither do blessing and anxiety go together.

Just as we don’t quite grasp what is meant by blessing, we also misunderstand “woe.” This word does not mean damned or condemned. It’s a warning word, a wake-up call, more like “Whoa” to change the spelling. It means, “Watch out!” “Look out!” “Beware!” The warning is to not be fooled by the illusion of security. Just because we are among the richest people on the planet does not mean it will always be so, and it does not mean that we are God’s favored children. We live in a world that is constantly shifting.

Everything that Jesus says in this sermon involves a reversal. The rules of the kingdom of God are exactly opposite of the rules of this world. In no way would we consider blessed the people Jesus names. So who are these blessed ones? Matthew’s gospel says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke’s gospel just says, “Blessed are you who are poor.” Matthew says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Luke says, “Blessed are you who hunger now.” The lists go on to speak of those who weep or are grieving and, those rejected and despised because of their faithfulness to God. This is not the group of people that we would come up with to describe as blessed!

Poverty itself is not a virtue. Jesus was not saying that poverty is good and that suffering is good. We should strive to alleviate both. What he was saying is that God will meet us there. It is a fact of human nature that when we are poor and when we are suffering all illusions of self-sufficiency are stripped away. We are left with God. It’s ironic because we work hard to achieve financial stability, but we’re often closer to God when we’re broke. This does not mean we should strive to be broke. But it does mean we should put God first regardless of our financial circumstances, because while Luke focuses on simple physical need, Matthew reminds us that there are many forms of poverty and many kinds of hunger. It makes little sense to us that it is when we are pushed to our limits that we are most able to receive God’s blessing, but it is only then that our perspective on life changes. Those who face death realize what life really is.

Jesus also promises a special blessing to those who are persecuted for their faith or for being “righteous” which just means doing the right thing. I was reading an article this week about Rusty Bowers, the remarkable man in Arizona who lost his position in conservative leadership for standing up to lies. He is a man of faith and he refused to bow. He even testified in the January 6<sup>th</sup> hearings. It cost him. He has been cast out of a party he loves and that he has been part of all his life. But in God’s eyes, I believe Rusty Bowers is blessed, because he acted with honor. He endured people picketing his home and yelling horrible lies about him while his daughter lay inside the family home dying. But he is still standing. He said he answered to God above all else and so he refused to participate in a lie. And Jesus said, Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.”

We are blessed when we do the right thing and refuse to give in to pressure to do the wrong thing. We are blessed when we are honest. We are

blessed when we are compassionate. We are blessed when we put God first. And we are also blessed when we treat our enemies according to kingdom rules, not social or political rules.

This is a very tense time. You may not have noticed, but there's an election next week. The attack ads are getting more and more vicious. People are afraid. They are fearful for their safety when they go to vote. They are fearful of neighbors who post signs for the opposite party. It's getting harder and harder to get election workers because people are fearful there may be violence, that they may be attacked. When I think of how things were when I grew up and how proud we all were that as Americans we had elections that were peaceful and whose results were respected by all without question, I feel like I have now entered the Twilight Zone, because today those of opposing political views have become "enemies."

Jesus answer to that is, "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. <sup>29</sup> If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. <sup>31</sup> **Do to others as you would have them do to you.**"

This is the opposite of how most people live. It is the opposite of how we all feel. And it is the antidote to hate. We don't have to have warm fuzzy feelings for the person we have a problem with. We don't even have to like them, but Jesus asks us to show agape love, which means to act in their best interests. And how we act is not dependent upon how THEY act! How many times have we all said things like, "Well I'll be nice if she's nice." or "I'll let it go if he changes his behavior." But that is a cop-out because then we don't have to change a thing! It also gives our power away. God does not want us to be reactive. God wants us to be proactive.

When we live simply and focus our eyes on God we are blessed. When we strive to do the right thing against all odds, we are blessed. And when we treat others as we would want to be treated, we are blessed. Being blessed does not mean winning the lottery, getting a promotion or buying a new car. It means being unburdened and satisfied. It means we being at peace in God's presence. Amen.

Isaiah 41:11-13

- <sup>11</sup> "All who rage against you  
will surely be ashamed and disgraced;  
those who oppose you  
will be as nothing and perish.  
<sup>12</sup> Though you search for your enemies,  
you will not find them.  
Those who wage war against you  
will be as nothing at all.  
<sup>13</sup> For I am the Lord your God

who takes hold of your right hand  
and says to you, Do not fear;  
I will help you.

Luke 6:20-31

<sup>20</sup> Looking at his disciples, he said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup> Blessed are you who hunger now,  
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup> Blessed are you when people hate you,  
when they exclude you and insult you  
and reject your name as evil,  
because of the Son of Man.

<sup>23</sup> “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.  
For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

<sup>24</sup> “But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have already received your comfort.

<sup>25</sup> Woe to you who are well fed now,  
for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

<sup>26</sup> Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,  
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

<sup>27</sup> “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. <sup>29</sup> If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.