

***“Bless You”***  
**Reverend Mary Cunningham Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**February 16, 2020**

**Genesis 12:1-8 (The Message)**

<sup>1</sup>God told Abram: “Leave your country, your family, and your father’s home for a land that I will show you. <sup>2-3</sup>I’ll make you a great nation and bless you. I’ll make you famous; you’ll be a blessing. I’ll bless those who bless you; those who curse you I’ll curse. All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you.”

<sup>4-6</sup>So Abram left just as God said, and Lot left with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot with him, along with all the possessions and people they had gotten in Haran, and set out for the land of Canaan and arrived safe and sound. Abram passed through the country as far as Shechem and the Oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites occupied the land.

<sup>7</sup>God appeared to Abram and said, “I will give this land to your children.” Abram built an altar at the place God had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup>He moved on from there to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent between Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. He built an altar there and prayed to God.

**Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup>When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: <sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.



**Sermon: *“Bless You”***

You often hear it exclaimed after someone sneezes. Bless you, or God bless you! Those words today suggest general well wishes to someone in a variety of situations, but have you ever wondered why we say them?

According to Snopes.com<sup>1</sup>, a website that explores a variety of internet posts, urban legends, and origination stories, here are some possibilities:

1. Folk legend says it was believed when someone sneezed, their soul was temporarily shot out of their body. Saying “bless you” protected the soul from being snatched up by Satan before it could return safely to its place inside one’s body.
2. Another suggested when one sneezed they were actually expelling an evil presence from their body. Thus saying “bless you” was a form of offering thanks for the now evil presence free body.
3. Back during the plague of 590AD, when someone sneezed it was understood they were in the early stages of the plague and beyond help. Saying “bless you” was a type of benediction meant to accompany the person on into the afterlife.
4. When someone sneezed, it was believed their heart stopped temporarily. Saying “bless you” was a blessing for their heart to start again and said as celebration for it doing so.

Not sure about you but these make me think twice about saying bless you! Obviously, these are folk tales and urban legends, none of which can say why we started saying “God bless you” when someone sneezes but most can agree it is out of good intent and kindness.

We certainly understand the use of blessing in the church. A blessing is often said over the elements during communion or a given to a couple at their wedding or over the family and the newly departed at a funeral. We bless our backpacks and offer blessings in the form of a charge to our graduating seniors. Its appropriate in the church because our understanding of blessing is biblical. From the very beginning, God blesses. Creation, Abraham, Noah, Moses...and it is front and center in our New Testament Scripture for today.

When we come to the Scripture we read this morning, Jesus has just called his first disciples. In Matthew, we begin with a lengthy genealogy before moving to the story of the Wise Men, then on into John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Then the temptation in the wilderness and then, Jesus romps right into his ministry and calls the first disciples. These four disciples will eventually become 12 – and after calling them, he begins to teach them. In that first teaching, in his very first lesson, the disciples learn the vision of God’s kingdom and that it is counter to everything they have known up until now. Their surrounding world views success, money and power as signs of God’s blessing upon them. Successful in war? That’s because God is blessing you. Have a lot of money? Again, God’s blessing. Do you have power? Yep, blessed. And then the flipside, if you are poor or sick or unable to care for yourself, well, that too is a sign – one that God has not blessed you and you must have done something to deserve what you have.

But the beatitudes flip that world upside down and point to God’s world that is the radical opposite of what they have known. These first verses of chapter 5 are the summary of what God’s kingdom IS. They are the very essence of God’s kingdom. These eight blessings show the reality of the Kingdom of God where God blesses those who are poor and hungry, those who mourn and are meek, those who are merciful and compassionate – those whom society has said are not. Those whom society has pushed to the margins and forgotten, they, too, are blessed...and often where we will come to find the very God who blesses them.

The beatitudes are a summary of God’s blessing given freely and generously to whom God wishes to give it not because of anything humans have done but only because of God’s love and mercy and compassion. In the disciples first lesson, Jesus lays out the very essence of the Kingdom of God: God blesses all...and by all, God means all. What a radical awakening that must have been...not only to the disciples but to the many early followers of Christ.

Today in church we, too, struggle to hear the beatitudes as they were intended. (How many of you had to memorize them in Sunday School?) We are more inclined to hear them as a list of what we are to do in order to earn our Christian card. Often, when we read this passage, we hear them as a list of instructions to follow - missing entirely the passage’s purpose.

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor explains, “Most of us do not know what to do with the beatitudes. Some of us have heard them for so long that they have lost their shock value for us. They just sound sort of sweet and familiar to us like a Christian poem – something to needlepoint and hang over the piano. Others of us hear them like new commandments and worry that we are not meek enough, pure enough, persecuted enough. But note that there are no ‘should’ or ‘oughts’ here; no ‘shalts’ or ‘shalt nots.’ The language of the beatitudes is not transactional language – do this and you will receive this or do that and you will receive that. It is descriptive language...not the language of law but of gospel, the language of hope and promise...”<sup>ii</sup> It is language of the Kingdom of God...and a reminder that we, too, are blessed. All means All!

In the very beginning – literally in Genesis – God created and the world is blessed. God created the fish and the birds – God blessed them. God said it was good. God created the living creatures the cattle and creeping things and wild animals...and blessed them. God said it was good. God created humanity. God blessed them and said it was good. From the very beginning, we were created and blessed before we could do anything to earn it or anything to lose. We are blessed. All of us.

When we are able to hear these words of Scripture in their intention, we see again the radical blessing of God and are reminded of its generosity and power, of its hope and promise. We are reminded of the profound blessing that enables us to see ourselves in solidarity among all people even given the wide variety of differences in human circumstance. Blessing connects us to each other and to the community of God of which we are a part.

I can hear you now as you leave church today, “But how do we know we are blessed? It is one thing to read it in Scripture but look at our world – we are inundated with a virus epidemic, violence and war permeate our headlines, the ugliness coming from our leaders in Washington is at an all-time high, famine and drought plague many foreign nations while children are being detained away from parents on our border... it is overwhelming. It is hard to believe we are blessed.”

Be careful not to confuse blessed for perfection. Being blessed does not end or protect us from the hardships and difficulties of the world. But it does equip us with a hope and promise that the Kingdom of God is coming...and is, in some smaller ways, already present through the very acts of blessing that connect us.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells this story: Her father was in the late stages of brain cancer and had had a seizure that wouldn't stop. At the hospital, sisters and sons and husbands took their turns standing over her Dad so that the examining room light wouldn't shine in his eyes. One would kiss him all over his forehead; another would wet the pink sponge to water his mouth.

Barbara's husband, Ed, went over to the bedside, said something and kneeled on the floor to fit his head underneath her dad's boney hand. He reached up and put one of his big hands on top of his father in law's hand to keep it from slipping off. He held still while her Dad's lips moved.

Later, Barbara asked, “What was that?” and Ed replied, “I asked him to give me his blessing.”

Barbara later said, “That we are able to bless one another is all the evidence we need to know that we have been blessed.”<sup>iii</sup>

I think she is on to something. Being blessed offers us the ability to see and hear word and actions of hope even in the midst of a world that can feel overwhelmingly hopeless. It shows forth the blessing in others and offers glimpses into the world that God is creating through acts of mercy and compassion. And it calls us to own our blessedness...which then inspires us to go out and show that in our actions with others. And because Christ so often chooses those places where others are hesitant to go...it is there we are called to bring food and share a meal; to hold a hand and sit beside someone who is hurting, grieving or even dying, to visit those who have no one – to go to detention center, under street bridges, into homeless shelters and food banks – to go to those places where people are often without comfort or health or strength or freedom, those places where they hunger for food or mercy or peace or safety. It is into those places we go to seek and serve those who are there...and where we often meet Christ and are transformed and reminded of that blessing yet again. It is in these places and spaces that we glimpse the very Kingdom of God which Jesus promises and is slowly creating...one blessing at a time.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/bless-you/> February 15, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Gospel Medicine*, Bowman & Littlefield, United Kingdom, 1995. Pp. 160-61.

<sup>iii</sup> Lynall, Rev. Canon J. January 29, 2017. <https://www.stjohnschurchstthomas.com/sermons/the-beatitudes-blessed-are/> February 15, 2020.