

Blessed

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One of my all-time favorite TV shows was the comedy, “Parks and Rec” In one of the funnier scenes, Tom Haverford is live tweeting his drive into work. One of his tweets, “4 green lights in a row, hashtag “blessed.”” The live tweeting ends, not surprisingly, when he has a wreck by running into a fire hydrant. It’s a funny scene and it’s meant to, in a good natured way, poke fun at those who claim that minor lucky conveniences are evidence of blessings.

While, these days I think most people who, like Tom, use the #blessed, are mostly doing it in fun and don’t really believe that God somehow ordained that they make four green lights in a row, I do think that trend came out of our culture’s take on blessing. There are plenty of pastors who claim that material success is a sign of God’s blessing. While most of us don’t subscribe to that theology, I think we do tend to think that people get what they deserve, or at least they should. That belief, in a nutshell, is what we call the American Dream – not necessarily that God rewards you but rather if you do what you’re supposed to do, if you work hard, then things are going to work out for you in a good way.

And to be honest, that’s good advice, especially for young people. We should teach our kids that hard work pays off, that doing things the right way gives you a better chance at success. But there’s also a danger in this philosophy as well and that is it can equate success with righteousness or blessing. When that happens, it’s easy to start blaming poor people for their poverty, abused people for their abuse, and so on. And that becomes especially harmful when it’s backed up by theology – this idea that your success or lack thereof is evidence of God’s blessing or God’s punishment on your life.

And that dangerous theology, in all its forms, has been around, I imagine, for as long as people have been thinking about the divine. It certainly was the dominant theology of Jesus’ day where those who were sick, or poor, or disabled were believed to be in that condition because they or their parents had sinned. In other words, it was their own fault. But on the other hand, those who were well, those who were wealthy, were believed to be in that condition because God was rewarding them for their righteousness. They were #blessed.

But then Jesus comes around and turns that whole theology upside down. It’s not the rich who are blessed but the poor, the hungry, the grieving. And the wealthy, well they are the ones who are in trouble.

Jesus’ statements on blessing may sound familiar to you but I’m guessing that you’re far more familiar with Matthew’s version known as the sermon on the mount of this teaching where Jesus doesn’t say, “Blessed are the poor,” but rather “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and so on. I’ve heard far more sermons, been to far more Bible studies on Matthew’s version than Luke’s. And it’s easy to understand why. I, and most of the people in the church I grew up in, most of the pastors I’ve had were not poor so the more spiritualized message of “poor in spirit” is both more relatable and less challenging.

And I'm certainly not alone in that. In fact, it seems like the early Christian community also was a little troubled by Luke's version. The consensus among New Testament scholars is that Luke's version was written earlier than Matthew's and is likely more accurate in terms of what Jesus actually said. But even a few years after Jesus' death, some of the early Christians were trying to tone down how radical some of his statements were – especially about wealth and poverty. And one way to do that – to tone them down – was to spiritualize them. So instead of “Blessed are the poor,” in Matthew, we have “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and so on.

And there's nothing wrong with recognizing that faith often has a spiritual rather than physical dimension. I think Jesus certainly would approve of the statement, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” in the abstract. The problem, though, is when you only spiritualize Jesus' gospel and ignore the very tangible, real world aspects. Alan Culpepper in his Commentary on the Gospel of Luke writes, “Spiritualizing the beatitudes grants those who are not poor access to them, but it also domesticates Jesus' scandalous gospel.”

The fact of the matter is that Jesus cared a whole lot about the poor. And he expected his followers to care a whole lot about the poor. That is Jesus' context.

But this Scripture comes to us today in our context.

I did not choose this Scripture today. Since our churches consolidated, we've been preaching from the lectionary which is a 3 year cycle of Scripture readings that many Christian churches all over the world use. Today's gospel reading is this passage we read earlier where Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor,” and it comes to us at this moment in time.

It comes to us when we are hearing that Congress is looking to cut more than 800 billions dollars from Medicaid, the healthcare option for those in poverty in our country.

The Scripture comes to us just a few weeks after we learned that the current administration is cutting off all funds to USAID, the part of our government whose mission it is to uplift the poorest of the poor across the globe.

And while it's easy to think of budget cuts as simply numbers on a spreadsheet, this is what those cuts mean:

More children will starve.

More children won't be able to go to the doctor when they're sick.

Fewer people will have clean drinking water.

Fewer refugees will find a place of safety.

And I could go on and on and on. The official policy of our government right now is to not do any of this. And because of these policies, people will die. People in our country will die. People all across the world will die. And the vast majority of them will be poor people.

This is our context. And into this context, we hear these words of Jesus:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Why am I preaching this sermon?

I'm not trying to convince you of something you don't already believe. I know that most if not all of you are deeply troubled by what's happening in our country right now. I know that most if not all of you absolutely believe that our nation should play an active role in caring for those who are most in need. I know that in many ways, I'm preaching to the choir.

But even so, it's a sermon that has to be preached.

It has to be preached because there are some things that have to be said no matter what and one of those things is that God always, always, always, cares about the poor. God always cares about the most vulnerable. God always cares about those living in desperate poverty.

And God expects, God demands that we care about them too.

God expects, God demands that our leaders care about them too.

It's so central to the gospel of Jesus Christ that to not say it would be the same as not preaching the gospel at all.

And yet, there are so many who are trying to claim the very opposite. The reason we must say that God cares about the poor is because there is an evil form of Christianity that is taking root that not only claims it is permissible to deny the poor the very basic necessities for life but that it's even God's will. It's the same theology of Jesus' day that blames the poor for their poverty and claims wealth is a sign of blessing.

We must say – not just me in this sermon today – but all of us in whatever platform we have that the very heart of our faith, the very heart of Christianity is to care for those who are most in need.

"Blessed are the poor"

"Blessed are the hungry."

I have to say it. We have to say it.

But there's a second reason I'm preaching this sermon today. When our government fails to act in ways that are compassionate, we must do all we can to fill in the gap. That doesn't mean we stop advocating. I hope all of us call our elected officials every week asking for our government to care for the most needy people in the world. But we also can put action behind our words.

That's why we do things like take up an offering to house refugees.

Or organize coat drives.

Or donate to the many non-profits that we support.

Or open up our own homes to refugees – something that six families in Milton – have recently decided to do.

Or you can help those in Milton who are opening up their homes.

We are living in a hard time. It's a time when it is so tempting to give into despair. But I want to tell you that I believe with all my heart that the best way to not give into despair is to do something.

Jesus lived in a hard time too. And this message, the message that our faith expects and demands that we care for the poor, that we advocate for the poor, has been the message of the gospel for 2000 years. And like our time, sometimes, forms of Christianity have so corrupted themselves to claim the very opposite of this message, but there have always been Christians who were doing all they could to care for the poor. In times when society was functioning as it should, there have been Christians caring for the poor. And at times when it felt like society was falling apart, there have been Christians caring for the poor. This has been our identity for 2000 years and it must be our identity now, maybe our primary identity – to do all we can to advocate for and to serve those who are so vulnerable right now.

It won't be enough. But it will be something.

There will still be so much need out there, but what we can do will mean everything to the people who are helped.

When I think about the importance of doing what we can even when it feels like it's not enough, I think about Dr. Paul Farmer. Paul was from Boston, but his true home was in Haiti or Rwanda or wherever he was most needed. He founded Partners in Health to provide healthcare to the world's poorest people. He changed the world for the better in so many ways. But in this time of such hard news that makes me wonder if there is hope for things to get better and hope that humans can actually make things better instead of far worse, we would do well to listen to Paul's perspective on success and failure.

The truth is that Paul probably failed more than he succeeded if by failed we mean was not able to cure the majority of his patients nor end the vast healthcare disparities throughout the world even though his organization made tremendous progress on both of those fronts. Tracy Kidder, who wrote Farmer's biography *Mountains beyond Mountains* (which I highly recommend) asked Farmer how he dealt with the toil of death.

And this is what he said:

"I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I actually think sometimes we may win. I don't dislike victory. ... You know, people from our background-like you, like me-we're used to being on a victory team, and actually what we're really trying to do is to make common cause with the losers. Those are two very different things. We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers, no, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat."

While Paul was a doctor and not a preacher, I realized that statement is as clear an articulation of the gospel as any I've ever heard. The gospel story is that Jesus had his own long defeat – that ended with his death on the cross. But we who claim this story for our own dare to believe that the cross is not the end of the story. We dare to believe that the way of Jesus, the way of love is never really defeated because even when you kill it, love has the way of resurrecting again and again and again. And in times like this when it's so hard to have any hope that love can win, that humans can be good, that sin and death and violence will not have the last word, it's so important to remember the great paradox of our faith.

Blessed are the poor.

Blesses are the hungry.

Love always wins, even when it loses.

We find life and joy, when we give of what we have for those most in need.

And even when it seems we have been defeated, we actually have overcome.

May we have the faith to believe it.

May we have the faith to live it.