

Sunday November 12th, 2017

Proper 27

PRAYER: O God, you are a faithful lover. We trust you, for you do good, every day. You create with willing hands, rejoicing in your labour. You open your hands to the poor and reach out to the needy. Let us love as you love us. Then we will love our neighbours as you love them. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: Our God has endowed us with talent beyond what we earn or deserve. These talents he has given us to render service to his kingdom. As we bring our gifts to God, may they reflect a wise investment of his trust in us and may they yield a great harvest.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God of all times and seasons; great and wonderful are your works. You set the sun in the heavens to give warmth to our days. The moon and the stars you cause to light up the night. We spend our days surrounded by your abiding presence; our nights are filled with the assurance that you care for the whole of creation. When we awake, we arise refreshed from the sleep that you grant us. When we retire, we rest secure in the comfort that you provide. As shadows lengthen and daylight hours grow shorter, praise of your name still comes forth from our mouths. You are God for all seasons of our lives. When winter chills, you warm us with your love. With the appearance of springtime, you cause new life to abound. The long days of summer you fill with times of recreation and leisure. During the fall, we thank you for the yield that comes from the earth. Teach us, O God, so to number our days that all that we do may be done in response to your grace. As you sent us Jesus Christ to redeem us from darkness, may we live in obedience to your will as the children of light. Give us the insight to discern your work, and the conviction to act according to what Christ commands us to do.

As you send us the Spirit as proof of your abiding goodness, may we be courageous in how we care for creation. May the love we show our sisters and brothers open their eyes to the dawn of new life. Help us in the midst of trials to be made bold by the confession that Christ stands with us. May we rise above everyday living to catch sight of your wonderful works and never fear the involvement that a new day can bring. You are God of the harvest; we offer ourselves in response to your providence.

BENEDICTION: People of Christ, encourage and build up one another. Strengthen the fainthearted, lift up the weak, be patient with the anxious, and rejoice in all circumstances. The one who calls you is faithful; the God of peace shall make you whole. Amen

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Matthew 5:1-12

“To Be or Not to Be?”

I am trying you know! I really am! I am trying to embrace modern technology. I've got the hang of email, and word processing, and recently I've been making great strides in online banking. This last skill was necessitated by a very traumatic personal experience I had, the last time I made a visit in person to my local bank branch. The staff was very busy that day, and what I wanted was actually quite a simple thing.

Trying to help with the crush of bank patrons, the branch manager was introducing himself, and asking if he could help in any way. When he got to me, he was clearly frustrated by the overwhelming demands of the other customers in line, for when he asked me what I required of the bank, I said that “I needed to check my balance”. And that is when he tried to push me over. (Get it-check your balance)

This bank story got me thinking that money is a funny thing. It occupies our thoughts a great deal and motivates our actions to the exclusion of just about everything else. We fuss, we worry, we hoard, we earn, we compromise, and we steal; we will do just about anything to get money and keep money. The funny thing is though, that as we experience significant life altering events, we soon learn that money cannot solve all our problems.

It does not matter, at least in Canada with our universal health care, how much money you have, if you a life-threatening illness. If you are sick, you are sick. Grief and death are no respecters of our pocketbooks. No one lies on their death bed and thinks, “Gee, I wish I had more money.” When life is beating down on you, it is true that our attitude towards money changes and we are apt to say, “It's just money, after all.”

I find it fascinating that when we speak of “Identity Theft”, what concerns us most is that the thief takes our money, or takes out loans in our names, again stealing money. No one I have heard of, steals identities to take our: relationships, our ideas, or other things that define us. I raise this all with you, because as I was preparing for today, I read Eugene Petersen's translation of our gospel lesson in his book “The Message”.

As I read Petersen's take on the Beatitudes, I was floored by a truth that had either eluded me, or had not gelled for me about this passage. If you take this list of “blessings” that Jesus pronounces, you get an odd sensation that it doesn't make any sense. I mean, how can being poor, or grieving, or persecuted, or any of these other negative states, ever hope to be a blessing.

If you talk to someone who is poor, or grieving, or hungry, or persecuted: the very last word they would use to describe their situation is “blessed”. In a culture where wealth is so important, it is hard to imagine that going without is a blessed state of affairs. Deprivation, or the losing of something, especially something significant, hardly seems conducive to anything positive. So, the question presents itself to us; why would Jesus say that anyone in these states is blessed.

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If we take blessing to mean a state of grace and dignity, what is the attraction to the Beatitudes? Well, one way of looking at any loss, is to ask yourself if in losing something; are you gaining anything new? I know that sometimes a loss is just that, a loss, but sometimes when we lose something, we gain something. In monetary terms that happens all the time. We lose, or give up money, to gain an item, or a service.

So, is it possible that when Jesus reminds us of our state of deprivation, he is pointing us to something better? Is he calling us to receive a positive benefit? Thanks to Eugene Petersen, I now see clearly that this is exactly what Jesus is telling us. In the economics of God's Kingdom, Jesus is often telling us that to gain, we must lose. Generally, Jesus says that "if we want to save our lives, we must first lose our lives."

The Apostle Paul, in the ultimate expression of this, joins in by saying that, "To die is gain". In each of the Beatitudes, the gain is the same. What we receive in these states of deprivation can, according to Jesus, compensate us far more than we ever imagined. The simplest way to explain this is to read Petersen's translation of this passage and it becomes pretty clear what Jesus is getting at.

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You're blessed when you are content with just who you are-no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'careful,' you find yourselves care for.

You're blessed when you get your inside world-your mind and heart-put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

Not only that-count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens-give a cheer, even! -for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble. (E. Petersen, The Message: Matthew 5:3-12)

Were you able to discern what the gain is coming out of your losses? Simply put, Jesus is telling us that by losing our lives, or the things we think are important in our lives, we gain greater intimacy with God. The more of this earthly life that is taken from us, or surrendered by us, the more we gain of the Kingdom of God. Elsewhere Jesus talks about this as the "Pearl of Great Price", or "The Treasure Hidden in a Field".

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Jesus' point is that God cannot fill your life with his presence, and blessing, if your life is full of other temporal stuff. You cannot accept any gift, if your hands are already full. Another way of seeing it is that the more you die to the world and self, the more you live for God. When I think about it, I now realize that this was Job's experience in the Old Testament. Here was a successful man in every aspect of the word.

He was wealthy, had a large family, good friends, and influence in spades. Satan challenges God to allow him to test Job, because as Satan points out, "There was a hedge around Job". Satan argues that it is no wonder Job blessed God and praised him; for he had everything anyone could ever want. Satan says, "But take away everything he has and he will surely curse you to your face."

God agrees to the test, except Satan must preserve Job's life. The story continues, with everything being taken away from Job (except interestingly enough, his wife). Job loses his family, his house, his livestock, his wealth and even his health as we read he is afflicted with boils. The magnitude of the loss is amplified in the biblical account when we read that Job lost everything in one day. The bible tells us that messenger after messenger comes to Job to bring the news of his loss.

Job's life, which was one of great security and material benefit, is now as miserable existence as anyone could imagine. We read that Job was sitting in ashes, wearing sack cloth, scratching his boils with a pottery shard. Truly, Les Miserable! I want to share with you that one of the most interesting things about Job's story is often missed by people. Throughout the whole book, Job remains steadfast in his belief in God, but he still raises many questions about why God allows terrible things to happen.

Finally, at the end of the book, God answers Job out of the whirlwind. He does not answer the question of why these things have happened; we only know because we can read the story behind the story, but Job never knows why. Instead of explaining why, God does something much better. Out of the whirlwind God draws Job closer to himself than Job has ever experienced before. There is pictured in Job, an intimacy with God that is so profound that Job realizes his questions are utterly meaningless.

I also think that Job's story, reminds us that more than answers to why good or bad things happen to us, what we long for, is to know God is with us. Now we know intellectually God is always with us, but there are many times in our lives where we long for a real awareness that he is close. Like Job, we hunger for greater intimacy with God. This is what the Beatitudes are all about; cultivating greater intimacy with God, and bringing more and more of the Kingdom of God into our lives.

As an example of how the Beatitude cultivates greater intimacy with God, I refer you to an insight from the pen of Francois Mauriac in his book, *What I believe*. On reflecting on the Beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God", Mauriac makes the point that purity is the condition needed for higher love-for a possession superior to all possessions: God himself. Mauriac goes on to point out that most of our arguments for purity are negative arguments.

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We are told to be pure, or you will feel guilty, or your marriage will fail, or you will be punished. But the Beatitudes clearly indicate a positive argument that fits neatly with the bible's pattern in describing sins. Sins are not a list of petty irritations drawn up for the sake of a jealous God. They are rather, a description of the impediments to spiritual growth. We are the ones who suffer if we sin, by forfeiting the development of character and Christ likeness that would have resulted if we had not sinned. (Leadership, Fall 1982, The War Within)

The Beatitudes, which is the very first thing Jesus preaches about when he takes to the Mount, is the starting place for our spiritual journey. As I mentioned last week, the Kingdom of God which Jesus invites us to participate in, is all about a reorientation of our priorities. The goals, possessions, relationships, everything the world believes is important, is insignificant in the Kingdom of God.

Read on in the Sermon on the Mount and you see that Jesus expands on this theme. Don't worry about what to eat or drink. Consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Love your enemies as yourself. When you pray, don't make a big production out of it. This is but a taste of Jesus' words on the subject, and it is a theme that is carried throughout Matthew.

The Kingdom of God is different than the world. It is radically different, and if you want to follow Jesus you must learn to embrace that difference, and be different than the world. The world has to see that when we are in what the world considers a state of deprivation, we are actually in a state of blessing. As the world worries and frets over temporal matters, we are to be at peace.

However, the world's thinking has invaded our minds and hearts. Consider again our friend Job. In worldly terms, when he had all his wealth, and family, and influence, we might be apt to say he was a blessed man. This is certainly how the world would see him. When he lost everything, what state was he in then? His friends thought he was being punished for some unacknowledged sin, is that what was happening?

How many of us would consider him a blessed man as he sat in ashes and scraped his boils? Would we dare to ever consider ourselves blessed as we sat with a loved one ill in hospital or received visitors at a funeral home? Jesus says we are, and Job was, because in our deprivation we are free to receive the fullness of God's presence. If our hands are empty, we can receive the offered gift.

Not an easy matter, I know. We place so much of our security and sense of wellbeing on things other than God. In fact, when bad things happen, we sometimes do the one thing Job refused to do despite Satan's tempting, and his wife's encouragement; we curse God. Or we doubt his existence, or question the goodness of his character. Like Job we need to learn that there is a bigger drama going on in the universe than what we can perceive.

We are small in comparison to the universe. We are but sparrows, but God loves us deeply. God's eye is on us, but is our eyes on him?

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We say we trust God, but we actually trust our bank accounts, our relationships, or our own righteousness. I think that embracing the Kingdom of God is a lifelong pursuit. We pray in the Lord's Prayer "Thy Kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The Beatitudes remind us that the one place the Kingdom of God truly needs to make inroads is in our own lives. The struggle is not out there, but rather in here; in our hearts. Are you finding life difficult right now? Well here is your opportunity to be blessed as never before, by turning fully to God, and trusting in his grander plan for you and for all of us.