

Beginning with the Benediction

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on November 24, 2019, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.
Scripture: Genesis 48:1, 8-16 and Matthew 5:1-12
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Whenever I hear, or sing, the Peter Lutkin arrangement of “The Lord Bless You and Keep You,” I am transported to a different time and place. I’m transported back in time to high school, and to a bus riding home with my fellow choir members. I sang in my school’s choir for all four years of high school—it was where I found friendship and belonging in my large school—and we learned the Lutkin arrangement every year and sang it regularly at various performances. Every time we took a bus somewhere, to a concert or a competition, we would sing this song, unaccompanied and unconduted, as the bus traveled the last couple of miles back to our campus.

We were often singing it late at night, coming back from an all-day event, and as the last tired miles spooled out, and the song rose and swirled around us, we knew we were together, no matter what had happened during the day, and we knew we were home.

What I can say today, that I wouldn’t have been able to articulate then, was that we were blessing each other with our singing, and that through that blessing, we were creating a community where all were welcome, where all voices were heard and valued. We were creating a blessed community, filled with gratitude.

What is a blessing? What does it mean to bless? As a noun the word “blessing” means a special favor or benefit, especially one that’s given by God. The verb “to bless” means “to hallow, or to make holy.” This very old English word also became associated with the word “bliss,” which means “perfect happiness” and “great joy.” When all these understandings got mushed together, the word “blessing” came to mean both a sacred gift, and something that makes us happy. And so blessings and gratitude are intimately connected. We are always grateful for the gifts we receive. Blessings and thanks go together.¹

Which is why the Beatitudes—which is how we usually refer to the beginning of the 5th chapter of Matthew’s gospel—are so puzzling. We usually do not give thanks for things like poverty, and hunger, and grief, and persecution. Yet here is Jesus, in his first public sermon in front of a large crowd, doing exactly that. Most of us contemporary folks have a very different idea of what makes a blessed life, don’t we? We think:

Blessed are the rich, for they own all the best stuff. Blessed are the sexy and glamorous, for everyone desires them. Blessed are the powerful, for they shall control the kingdoms of the earth. Blessed are those who get everything they ever wanted; they alone will be satisfied. Blessed are the famous, for their reward is eternal life.²

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 140.

² *Ibid.*

Helped along by all the images that bombard our senses every day, we hold money, beauty, power, achievement, and fame in high esteem—even if we say we don't. If only we had them—or even just one of them, we think that our lives would be blessed. We have forgotten the meaning of the word “blessing,” identifying it with material possessions, rather than true gifts from God.

The gospels were originally written in Greek, and the Greek word for “blessing” that is used in the original Greek versions of Matthew is *makarios*, which means both “happiness” and “favor.” Because of this, some English translations of the Bible replace the word “blessed” with the word “happy,” so the beatitudes read as “Happy are the poor in spirit” and “Happy are those who are hungry.” But I think equating the word “blessing” as mere happiness misses a complete understanding of the word, and of what I think Jesus means here.

But if those Bible translators had instead used the alternate meaning of *makarios*—the word “favor,” that would actually “open up a new understanding of the relationship between blessing and gratitude. Blessing is not just happiness, but favor,”³ as theologian Diana Butler Bass notes in her book, *Grateful*: “In the Christian scriptures, the word specifically means God’s favor, often called ‘grace’ or ‘abundance.’ ‘Favored are the poor in spirit or ‘Gifted are the poor in spirit’ would be equally valid ways of making sense of the word *makarios*.”⁴

The sense of the Beatitudes is not “If you are poor, God will bless you” (as a sort of consolation prize) or “If you do nice things for the poor, God will bless you.” Nor is it “Be happy for poverty.” Instead, “Blessed are the poor” could be read, “God privileges the poor.” If you are poor, you are favored by God. God’s gifts are with you. This would have shocked Jesus’s hearers on that day long ago. Blessing was beyond the reach of everyday people. “The blessed” in Greek actually became interchangeable with “the gods” and “the elite” and meant something like “those worthy of honor.” Thus, “the blessed” were the big shots of the ancient world, the upper crust, those who lived above all the worries of normal existence. The poor, “the losers,” had to live with shame. Even back then, the blessed were the rich, not the poor.⁵

In the first-century world of Jesus and his followers, there was a strict hierarchy of blessings. If you’ve been here in the last two weeks, you might recall that Pastor Jeff talked about how, in the Roman Empire, gratitude was transactional, based on a *quid pro quo* patronage system. A small group of politically and economically powerful people at the very top of the hierarchy were responsible for sending down benefits to the poor masses, while the poor masses were responsible for showing gratitude by sending up taxes, tribute, loyalty, and so on, to the elites.

Those benefits—protection, land, power, position, provision—were considered blessings. People during this time believed that the emperor, at the top of the hierarchy, was uniquely blessed, and that all blessings flowed through him to everyone else. The closer you were to the emperor, the more worthy you were of blessings, the more blessings you received, and the more blessings you had to potentially offer to others. And those at the very bottom received very little.

³ Ibid., 141.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

So when Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor,” he is upending the social hierarchy and the politics of blessing. He is preaching that blessings are more than mere happiness. Instead, they are a social vision—a vision of a world where there is no hierarchy and where everyone has blessings. Jesus says that God gives gifts to everyone, but God gives gifts in particular to the vulnerable and those at the wide bottom of the social pyramid. Gifts are not only for the few, Jesus says, but wildly and abundantly distributed for all. And the people at the very bottom—those that the elites view as the losers? God’s favor resides with them. Jesus is saying that God has uniquely blessed *them*, not just the emperor.⁶

Another misconception about blessing that I think Jesus is debunking in his sermon is that blessing is directed toward individuals. But in this sermon about blessings, Jesus is addressing a crowd. Notice how, of the nine blessings he mentions, seven of them are plural, and only two are singular. The people sitting together on that grassy hillside above the Sea of Galilee may have listened to Jesus bless them and felt as though he had looked them in the eye and blessed them individually, but Jesus was more concerned about creating a blessed community than⁷ blessing people one by one, as though he is saying, “This is not about my blessings, but about all of our blessings together, and what we become together when we recognize that God has blessed us.”

At the end of his sermon, Mathew’s gospel tells us that, “when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching.”⁸ The gospel account doesn’t say why, but I imagine they were astounded that he had broken open the imperial system of *quid pro quo* gratitude and taught them that God’s blessings are for all, without expectation of return. Astounded that they, too could be among the blessed. They started out as a crowd of individuals, and they ended as a community, formed through blessing and *relational*, rather than transactional gratitude.

Despite the fact that the Roman Empire fell in the fifth century, its political structure of transactional gratitude has continued to plague Western society. It continued into the next era in the form of medieval feudalism, developing into a complex system of *quid pro quo* with “devastating social consequences involving everything from destructive land practices and unjust laws to wars of insult and personal revenge.”⁹ It was this medieval system that developed what I think of as one of the most violent and destructive Christian theologies about the meaning of Jesus and salvation, that of penal substitutionary atonement.

In penal substitutionary atonement theology, God is seen as a feudal lord that we have deeply offended and whom we must pay to atone for our depravity and sinfulness. Since we are so lowly and are unable to repay God for so great a debt, Jesus had to be sacrificed as a substitute in order to atone for us. This theology is counter to the relational image of God that Jesus offers in the Beatitudes. It’s a theology rooted in the transactional imperial system of Rome, and it’s not at all based in scripture. It’s a theology that helps to maintain the structure of the *quid pro quo* pyramid, rather than flattening it out, which is what Jesus was trying to do. Unfortunately, it’s a

⁶ Ibid., 142

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mathew 7:28 (NRSV)

⁹ Butler Bass, 145.

theology that persists, despite its lack of biblical grounding and association with the very oppressive political system that Jesus was resisting.

Thankfully for Western societies, new structures of governance emerged with the Enlightenment era, based not on transactional gratitude, but on “covenants, contracts, democratic process, and the rule of law.”¹⁰ This doesn’t mean that transactional gratitude disappeared, however; it was merely pushed into the sphere of business, rather than government.

Transactional gratitude never really went away. And, as commercial and corporate interests have grown larger and more formidable, the imperial system of transactional gratitude has turned into lobbying and political action committees, “manipulating politicians and bestowing generosity in return for favorable policies. Anyone who breaks rank with the patron is punished by withdrawal of favor (i.e., political cash). For all intents and purposes, the structure of public gratitude that bedevils our society today resembles that of ancient Rome.”¹¹

A Jeff mentioned last week, the antidote to *quid pro quo*, transactional gratitude is *pro bono* gratitude, or relational gratitude. *Pro bono* gratitude is for the good of all, and is a gift or blessing offered without expectation of return. When we create communities of *pro bono* gratitude, where everyone receives blessings without need for returning them, we come closer to creating the beloved community, the kin-dom of God that Jesus imagined.

Imagine how *pro bono* gratitude would transform our political system—indeed, how it would transform our entire national culture! Imagine a system in which our politicians act “not because [they] expect anything in return, not out of reciprocal obligation, but simply because it is the right thing to do and spreads benefit to the entire community.”¹²

My friends, this is my prayer for us in this Thanksgiving season: that we would put our imagination into action, to transform our system into one of *pro bono* gratitude. That we would become a community of blessing and gratitude—that community created by Jesus on the hillside above the sea of Galilee. That we would begin right here by blessing each other, and by sharing our blessings with everyone we meet. Amen.

¹⁰ Ibid., 146.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 165.