



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So help me understand something here. Blessings are a good thing, right? Yeah? We say things like, I am so blessed to have such a loving family. I'm so blessed to have good health. I know I say things like, I feel so blessed to work here at Christ Church Cranbrook, to have such amazing colleagues. Last week when I was at home, sick, in bed, miserable, sneezing, headache, pounding, I'm watching the service online, and Bill had all of you turn around and wave at me. I felt blessed in that moment, that made me feel really good.

Even the Bible talks about blessings in this way. The Psalms, the Proverbs, they're filled with promises about how God will bless us with good things, with long life, fame, riches. You never hear people say things like, you know, Chris, I feel like my life is falling apart. I'm so blessed. Have you seen on Facebook? You know, my wife is cheating on me. The dog just died. I'm probably going to have to go to a bankruptcy attorney, #soblessed. I have yet to see that, and if you do, tag me in that post, please.

And yet, that is in a way what Jesus is doing here in the Sermon on the Mount. I mean, some of these are clearly good, being a peacemaker, being merciful. But what about blessed are the poor in spirit? Do you feel blessed when you feel distant from God? Blessed are the meek. Is being powerless a blessing in the world we live in? Blessed are those who mourn. When you're at your most devastated because you've lost someone close to you, a blessing? How about blessed are the persecuted? Have you ever been falsely accused? Do you feel blessed when people hate you or spread lies about you?

In fact, Jesus is describing as blessings things that elsewhere in the Bible would be described as God's punishments. And so for this reason they have been something of a challenge to preachers and theologians because some of them just, they just don't compute in the way we think of God or in the way we think life is supposed to work. But I want to suggest that that is only true if we try to understand them through the same mindset that got us lost in the first place.

That is, if we have as our basic assumption that this is a dog-eat-dog world, that God is fundamentally our judge, that He is a God who blesses the good people and curses the bad people. If we see God as fundamentally transactional in His dealings with us, rewarding those who follow the rules, punishing those who

don't, then this world is indeed a very uncertain and even scary place. And yes, some of these Beatitudes won't make a lot of sense. But that doesn't stop us from trying.

Have you ever heard someone suggest that perhaps Jesus is trying to shame us, to provoke us into better choices, by making us feel guilty about our privilege or about our material comforts? After all, we do that at home, don't we? Do you ever tell your kids, you know, you should really be thankful for that food. There are people starving in this world. Do you think God manipulates us like that? He might, if that's the mindset we bring to it. Or perhaps, it's been suggested, Jesus is talking about the afterlife. Maybe Jesus is saying that, you know, if you can just tough it out, if you can just keep the faith while you suffer through this mess, your blessings will come eventually. After you die, but eventually.

Not exactly inspiring, it seems to me. It's true to a certain degree, absolutely. But it doesn't sound like the Jesus who said He came to give us abundant life. And it certainly doesn't sound like the Jesus who spent His life healing the sick, feeding the poor, and inviting us to do the same. He never tells them, you just need to wait it out. He never romanticizes suffering or poverty. His mission is to end it on earth, as it is in heaven. But again, if our understanding of blessings is good stuff coming our way, well, this might be the best explanation we can come up with.

The last one is an interpretation that caught on in the Middle Ages. So this one isn't going to work out too well either. This one argues that Jesus wasn't even talking to us, not us regular Christians. The Beatitudes were for the spiritual elites, monks, nuns, people who took special vows of poverty or obedience, the great state saints that we have canonized in our stained glass windows. They were intentionally unattainable for us regular Christians, because their purpose was to remind us how far we have fallen, how much we sin, and, therefore, how much we need God's mercy.

And there's that transactional lens once again. Here's what you need to get into my good graces. But I've set the bar really high. So if you put your faith in my Son, he will make things right with me. Quid pro quo. Carrot and stick. If you do this, God will do that. Again, not terribly inspiring to me.

I want to suggest that we can't understand the Beatitudes through our existing mindset, because Jesus is trying to invite us into an entirely new mindset. The mind of Christ. He's inviting us to leave behind transactional religion and reward punishment systems and embrace instead a transformational faith. One that no longer judges reality as good or bad, blessings or curses. One that no longer blames God for our misfortunes or thanks God when things go our way. And instead embrace a new way of seeing the world that accepts reality for what it is and trusts whatever comes our way, with God's help, can be redeemed for all of us, for all time.

So let's look at a couple of them and see if we might imagine how this could be true. Blessed are the poor in spirit. How could that be true? Could it be that unlike so many of us who think we have it all figured out, who are still doing life largely under our own power and trust in ourselves, those who are poor in spirit know that they are lost. They know their spiritual poverty. They know they can't do life on their own anymore.

They've taken that first step, that all-important first step. They know their need for God. They've experienced enough life, they've seen enough disappointment to see all of their old idols fail them and their old fuel run out. And so exhausted and humiliated, defeated like the prodigal son, they have tried everything else and they are finally ready to return home to the only one who can truly fill their heart, to the only one who can renew their life.

Blessed are the poor in spirit because they know their need for a savior. Blessed are those who mourn because they know and they have known love. They have risked giving their heart to someone, they know firsthand the preciousness of life, and they don't try to deny it when they lose it. They don't run from it. They don't try to bury it with distractions. They wear it on their sleeves and in doing so invite us in. And allow us to walk with them. They accept the casseroles that show up on their door. They say yes to the invitations that come their way, because they know that their sadness is too heavy to bear alone. And we in turn, are blessed to help them carry it. And, when it's our turn, those who mourn today will become the wounded healers of tomorrow because they've been there, they've walked in our shoes, they know what it's like, and now they can be there for us in ways that no one else ever could.

Blessed are the meek because they have found the peace and the open-heartedness and the joy and the freedom that comes with humility, the surrender. They no longer have to go about this world trying to control it, trying to manage it, trying to manipulate it, trying to look like they're in charge, trying to have all the answers. They have raised the white flag to all that stuff. And their answers now are more questions. They've learned to listen more than talk, they honor the experiences of others, they value diverse perspectives, and they have a genuine curiosity about them. They've learned the great lesson of life: that all the virtues we could ever name, compassion, empathy, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, they all have their birthplace in humility.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for my sake. How could that be? Because they are living their faith. Rather than keep their heads down, rather than go along to get along, rather than blend in in an unjust world, they speak out. They roll up their sleeves and work against unjust structures and unfair practices. They stare down the bullies and they stand up for those on the outside. They know that their own humanity is bound up in yours. So like the persistent widow, they

don't stop. They don't give in. They annoy politicians. They speak truth to power and they do so at great risk to themselves, their reputations, their careers, even their freedom because they have come to see that all those things are just prisons in another form. Because they've caught a glimpse of the world through the eyes of God and they now know that they could never unsee that no one is free until we are all free.

Blessings, they're not rewards for the faithful. They are not something that happens to us or dependent on outside circumstances going our way. They are who we are. We are blessings. It's where we start. We don't have to earn them and they cannot be taken away. God loved us first so that we can love. God blessed us first so that we can be a blessing to others. It's always been a gift with God, pure gift, not to keep us in line, but to empower us to be transformed, to transform this world.

The Beatitudes, they're not reserved for the lofty or for those in our stained glass windows. They are not impossible rules to follow. They are descriptions of how you and me, everyday saints, right here, right now, how we can see the world when we put down our old minds, and our old assumptions, and our old expectations about how things are supposed to go, and who's supposed to be in charge, and put on the mind of Christ. They are a description of the faith that we are about to baptize folks into and the transformed life that awaits all of us. And they are a solemn promise that everything and everyone can and will be redeemed with God.

Amen.