



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

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

So help me out here for just a moment. Blessings are good things, right? I mean, don't we say things all the time like, I'm so blessed to have a loving family? I'm so blessed to have good health. I know I'm really blessed to have a husband that no matter what I try to make in the kitchen, he says he always loves it. I saw a post on social media the other day that went something like this. Parents: kids at the neighbor's, glass of wine poured, warm bath drawn #soblessed

When I drop my girls off at school, I tell them as they're getting out the door, don't forget to bless someone today. That's what you get for being a preacher's kid, right? You don't get the have a nice day. You have work to do, so, you know, go lend a hand, right? Stick up for a kid that's getting picked on, help somebody out, that kind of thing. Even the Bible talks about blessings this way. We hear in the Psalms all the time, for example, all the ways that God blesses His people with protection and health and prosperity.

So why then, why in the Sermon on the Mount that we just heard, does Jesus seem to be saying something a little different? Blessed are the poor in spirit. Do we feel blessed when we feel distant from God? Blessed are the people who mourn. When you're deeply in grief, is that a blessing? Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the reviled and the persecuted. Those who are wrongly condemned for doing the right thing. Those who become targets themselves because they stood up for somebody else, as we've been watching on the news these last few weeks. Is that a blessing?

I think the first thing to understand is that when Jesus talks about blessings, it's clearly not the typical way we do it. It's not a euphemism for happiness or good fortune. It's not a sign of comfort or success. It's not a reward. For Jesus, blessing is not a shorthand for those times in life when it's all just going our way. And it can be hard to wrap your minds around that. I get it. Because we live in a culture that really is all about happiness, right? It's basically the goal. It's all over our consumer culture. It's woven into our country's very fabric: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But what if – what if it wasn't about happiness at, at all? What if being blessed was about actually becoming awake, awake to the presence of God in our life? What if it was about becoming aware of all the ways that God draws near to us and transforms us even when we feel most abandoned and alone?

When our twin girls were born, and some of you know this story, it began as the greatest day of our life. It was a miracle in every sense of the word. Alina was born first. And she went right into Joe's arms to do that skin to skin that they said was so important. But Gianna, she had complications. As she was being delivered, her lungs filled with fluid and she couldn't breathe. And just like that, we went from unbelievable joy to horror as we saw her rushed over to a table and specialists started to work on her to clear her lungs. And when that failed, she was rushed to a children's hospital where she was kept sedated on a ventilator in a kind of plastic incubator of sorts covered in tubes and wires.

And for the next several weeks, we stood vigil, unable to hold her, unable to comfort her, unsure if she even knew we were there. And if you've ever been at the bedside of somebody fighting for their life, and I know some of you have, there's a feeling of helplessness isn't there? You listen for every change. You look for every sign. If there's a movement. You hear the beeps on those machines. You look for the numbers as they change, even though you don't understand them. It can be exhausting. You don't sleep. You feel guilty when you have to go home.

And it can be frustrating because you don't understand what's going on, and no one really talks to you. When they do, you don't always understand them, and maybe they say different things and you're constantly worried if you're making the right choices and second guessing everything, all the while – all the while you're trying to manage the rest of your life at home. So, to be honest, you know, feeling blessed was the furthest thing from my mind in those days.

And then one afternoon I stepped out of the ICU to clear my head, to get some air, and I noticed out of the window that the hospital had a playground down in the courtyard. And I saw a little boy, he was maybe six or seven, and he was in a hospital gown and he was trying to climb this kind of mushroom shaped slide. But he was having a hard time because he was hooked up to an IV pole. And the nurse was doing her best to kind of maneuver it around for him but the cord was only so long. But, you know, none of that seemed to bother him because he still had this big, huge smile on his face. He seemed so happy, so in the moment playing in the sun. And it was contagious. I smiled, his nurse was laughing. It was this beautiful scene.

And then I noticed that under his baseball cap, he didn't have any hair. And then I realized what he was likely being treated for, and my heart broke and it became filled. It became filled in a way that I will never forget. It was as if God had just

bottled up all the hope that this world could ever need, and just poured it out to that face of that little boy. Enough hope, it seemed, for every anxious parent in that hospital, every exhausted nurse, every doctor, every child, and even me. It was as if God was announcing His presence for anyone with the eyes to see. Do not fear for I am with you. In the midst of all of this, all the sickness, all the uncertainty, all the fear, all the doubt, I am here and I will not be turned away.

Seeing that little boy trying to play like any other kid, seeing his resilience, seeing his joy shine through, it didn't change our circumstances. It didn't change the fact that we still had a long road ahead. We still had lots of unknowns. But it did change me. Seeing God's presence so unmistakably, it brought me out of myself somehow. I stopped being so wrapped up in my own worries about the future. I stopped being so frustrated about all the things that weren't going the way that they were supposed to, and I became present, present to the here and to the now, to the reality that had been put in front of me because that was where God was as well.

I became more present to Joe. I became more present to Alina who was at home. More present to the nurses who were doing their best. To the other families on our floor, some of whom were more scared than I. I became grateful to the volunteers at the Ronald McDonald House who served dinner to families like ours every single night. God's presence was all over that hospital, but it wasn't going to be found in the absence of suffering. It wasn't going to be found in the perfect outcomes or the happy endings. It was going to be found in the care and the compassion and the resilience that was literally everywhere once I had the eyes to see.

I think that's what Jesus is trying to tell us today in these beatitudes. That God's blessing is not going to be found in the happiness we chase, but in the presence of God that is with us always, even when we least expect it, even in the darkest of hours. Present, so that we might be transformed so that we might see the other, see the possibility, see the needs in front of us and walk with them.

And I think there's a choice involved in this. We can't always change our circumstances, you know? We can't control them as much as we might try. But we can, we can, with God's help, we can accept them for what they are, and we can choose how we respond to them. Instead of holding on to our anger and our frustration about how things were supposed to go, we can choose to surrender, to surrender to the moment that we are actually in, and then to let the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus shape what we do next.

A few weeks ago, a parishioner here was attending his last service before entering treatment for his cancer. And it was the epiphany and I had just preached a sermon about bringing the light of Christ wherever we go. And he came up

afterwards, he said, Father Chris, I want to thank you for that message because it was just what I needed to hear because now I know what I need to do. I need to go into that hospital, no matter what the chemo does to me, no matter what they throw at me, no matter how sick I might feel, no matter how exhausted I might become, I need to somehow let that light of Christ shine through me wherever I can. To the nurses, to the doctors, to the person in the bed next to me, I'm going to try to lift them up however I can.

And when he said it, he had this incredible smile on his face, you know, this gleam in his eyes, and it gave me a glimpse of that same hope that I had seen in that playground so many years before. That's the freedom that God gives us. That's the choice we get to make, to open our eyes, to open our hearts, to open our holy imaginations to the presence that is already there already within us, and to let love do the rest.

It's something we actually practice right here every Sunday. We just did it, in fact. When the gospel comes down that center aisle, what do we do? What do we do? We turn, right? We turn to face the gospel, not out of politeness. We turn to practice with our bodies, what we long to do with our lives, that in response to the good news that comes into our very midst, we turn, we turn our lives toward God. And we may not know what we're about to hear. We may not know how it's going to challenge us. We may not know what road it might send us down or certainly where any of it will end. God has that part. Okay? All we need to do is to turn, to awaken to God's presence and then let love shape what we do next.

Blessed are those who draw near to God when they reach the end of themselves. Blessed are those who choose love in the face of fear. Blessed are those who turn to see your face and then allow themselves to become the face of hope themselves. This, I think, is what the beatitudes invite us into. Blessing isn't life going our way. Blessing is God going with us. Blessing isn't the absent of struggle. It's God who refuses to leave, who sits with us in the darkness and will not be turned away. Blessing is the love that rises up within us when we think we have nothing left. Blessing is the God who goes with us so that we might go with others so that no one, no one is ever left to face their perils alone.

Amen.