
Beatitudes of Blessing!

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Epiphany 4 – Year A

Jesus went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (Matthew 5:1-12)

Blessed are you! Blessings to the poor! Blessings to those who mourn! Blessings to the meek! Blessings to those who hunger and thirst! Blessings to the merciful! Blessings to the pure in heart! Blessings to the peacemakers! Blessings to the persecuted! Blessings to those who are reviled!

Blessed! Blessings to you! “Blessing” is the most powerful word in the Bible.

In the Book of Genesis (1:22), the very first thing God does after creating humankind is to bless them. God *blesses* Adam and Eve, and says, “be fruitful and multiply.” God blessed them, and began the long story of blessing all the rest of us.

At Genesis 12:2, when God called Abraham to be a father of faith, God said, “I will bless you, ...*so that you will be a blessing.*” With that proclamation, God set in motion a whole family of blessing, a family which would one day contain all sorts of sons and daughters of Abraham. Every child of Abraham—Jewish and Christian and Muslim—and Hindu and Buddhist and Confucian, too—for every child of faith is a child of Abraham—every child of Abraham is meant to be a blessing in this world. To follow God, to follow Abraham, is to bless.

In the Book of Numbers (6:22-27), at the end of Moses’ mighty life and ministry, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, The Lord *bless* you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

In the Psalms, blessings occur in both good times and bad times, in both joyful and sad times. And at Psalm 103, the psalmist sums it all up with the great words, “*Bless* the Lord, O my soul. Let all that is within me, *bless* his holy name.” Blessings to humanity, but blessings to God, too. When we bless God, we bring the journey of blessing full circle, back to the originator of blessing.

Our gospel for today, this passage from Matthew, joins other scriptures as one of the grand “blessing parties” of the Bible. We call this set of verses “the Beatitudes,” “the Blessings.” Jesus gathers his disciples together, up on a mountain, and he conducts a “Blessing Meeting.” He looks out over the crowd, and he sees... What *does* he see?

What does Jesus see when he looks out over humanity? Well, he sees what any of us would see if we take an honest look at humanity. He sees people who are poor, people who are mourning, people who are meek and persecuted. He sees people trying to make peace, trying to be merciful. And he sees people who are scorned and reviled. He sees us, all of us. Jesus doesn't see only the high and mighty, the rich and the powerful. He sees the lowly; Jesus sees you and me.

And Jesus blesses that crowd, that crowd which represents all of humanity. Jesus enjoys blessing all people, but especially the poor and the persecuted, those who mourn, and those who have mercy, and those who make peace. The Beatitudes are Jesus' Blessing Meeting. Beatitudes of Blessing!

Two weeks ago, at the inauguration of the new President of the United States, I was glad, so glad, to hear this very scripture read as part of the ceremony. The reader made no comment except for the solemn recitation of these blessings. Did you hear it? It was God speaking to our country and saying, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who are persecuted." If you are persecuted for righteousness sake, no matter who you are, no matter what religion you are, if you are persecuted for righteousness sake, Jesus blesses you—and this country promises to bless you too.

Surely, this particular Christian Church, the Cathedral of St. Philip, is saying that. That is why we read this passage today. We want to bless like God blesses. We want to bless like Jesus blesses.

Of course, some of us have gotten into trouble trying to bless like God blesses. We have blessed civil rights, reproductive rights, gay and lesbian rights; and we will continue to do so. And we will continue, in this Christian Church, to bless the poor and the persecuted, especially those forced to flee their own countries, persecuted for righteousness' sake.

In the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, the prophet sees a vision of the kingdom of heaven. He says, "I looked out and I saw a great multitude that no one could count, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9). That is to say: they are not just Christians in this vision. They are all the people of God, all blessed by God, all welcomed by God. They have come out of persecution, and yet they are singing! They are singing, "*Blessing* ... be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Yes, heaven itself is a place of blessing, and for blessing. But it takes practice. That is why we practice blessing here on earth. That is why we practice heaven on earth.

When I bless the Peachtree Road Race—year after year on the Fourth of July, Independence Day—as sixty thousand people run (or walk!) past our church within three hours, I am blessing all sorts and conditions, all of humanity in that wondrous event. To every tribe, and people, and language: Blessings to you!

Blessings to Muslims: *Asalamu Aleikum!*

Blessings to Jews. *Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu*

Blessings to Christians: Christ bless you! *Benedicite Deus*

To Hindus, to Buddhists, to atheists, to agnostics.

God blesses each and every one of us. *Dios les bendiga.*

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It may be that the most important thing we do in life is bless people. Blessing is the most important thing we can do. Certainly the most important thing we do with *children* is bless them.

That brings us to today, and the special occasion for today. At our earlier service today, we enrolled a new class of youth confirmands, 53 young people starting the process of making a mature affirmation of their Christian faith. Our process involves special prayers for them here in church, and they come forward to the altar rail. These youth are not children anymore. They are probably not adults yet (their parents might agree with that!). But they are young men and women. They are our children who are miraculously becoming men and women. Physically, becoming a man or a woman means becoming able to generate, to create, to reproduce. That is what the physical development of a man or a woman means.

But there is a spiritual development in becoming a man or a woman, too. That spiritual development can be described in one word: *Blessing*. Being a man or woman means being able to bless.

As these young people engaged this rite of enrollment into confirmation, we showed them something about being an adult.

We showed them how to bless. When the youth knelt at the altar rail, a parent, or godparent, or friend, laid a holy hand on these young men and woman; they laid a hand of blessing. And they spoke a word of blessing.

The most important thing a parent ever does is bless a child. And we are meant to do it over and over again. For we are the children of Abraham, the children of blessing. Each of us reproduces what our elders show us. We copy our elders. From our faithful elders, we learn how to reproduce blessing. Now, it is our joy to pass that blessing on to the next generation.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek! Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, the merciful, the pure in heart! Blessed are the peacemakers! Blessed are those persecuted! Blessed are you, all of you, the children of Abraham and children of God.

AMEN.

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