**Beatitudes and Blessing**

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Scripture: Deut. 28:1-11, 15-20, Matt. 5:1-12

Hymns: StJ 94

As some of you know, I worked as a camp pastor at Camp Elim (near Swift Current) this past July. One of the Bible sessions I led with the children began with reading the creation story from Genesis 1, at the very beginning of the Bible. I read a children’s Bible version, and afterwards, my first question for the children was: what made the humans different from the rest of creation? One eager little girl put up her hand. “That they sinned?” was her answer. My heart sank a bit at that response. “No, we’re not up to that story yet,” I gently responded. “Any other ideas?” Finally, the answer came: that we’re made in God’s image. That’s what sets us apart as human beings at the very beginning of creation: we are in the image of God.

Now, I don’t fault that little girl for giving the answer she did. She was too young to have come up with a theology of “original sin” on her own – it must have been taught to her at church or home or both. But it made my heart sink to hear her speak that way because our Biblical story does not, in fact, begin with human sin, but with what some theologians call “original blessing.” Richard Rohr writes about it this way: “For some reason, most Christian theology seems to start with Genesis 3—which features Adam and Eve—what Augustine would centuries later call ‘original sin.’ When you start with the negative or with a problem, it’s not surprising that you end with [the violence of] Armageddon and Apocalypse.” But “Looking at Creation in progress, [we read,] ‘God saw that it was good’ five times and ‘found it very good’ after the sixth day (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). We all need to know that this wonderful thing called life is going somewhere and somewhere good. It is going someplace good because it came from goodness—a beginning of ‘original blessing’ instead of ‘original sin.’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

During the summer, our worship has been focused around a different biblical example of blessing: namely, the Beatitudes from Matthew 5, Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. Now this sermon of Jesus’ is so central to Mennonite faith that it’s been called our “canon within the canon” – or our “Bible within the Bible” – a key passage shaping our lives of faith. The worship space at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana (one of our main Mennonite seminaries where pastors and church leaders are trained) is even called the Chapel of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5 is a big deal in our tradition.

But of course, it’s not the only passage about blessing in the Bible, or even within the Gospels (Luke has one too, which I’ll get back to in a minute). There’s everything from the original blessing of God declaring creation “good” at the beginning to the blessing of Abram and Sarai (later Abraham and Sarah) being chosen as God’s people, to the blessings of the Exodus and the promised land, to Jacob refusing to let go of the angel until he receives a blessing. In the Gospels, we have Jesus’ beginnings also marked by blessing as Mary is blessed by Elizabeth and Mary herself declares that “all generations will call me blessed” in her song of praise, the Magnificat. John the Baptist blesses Jesus and Jesus blesses all kinds of unexpected people. And then we’re back to Jesus’ focus on blessings in his Sermon on the Mount, those iconic words which we have been singing and reading and hearing about this summer.

Well, one thing to notice is that not all understandings of blessing are the same in these passages! It’s quite a diverse conversation about what it means to be blessed. And our passage from Deuteronomy 28 from today really highlights that diversity, especially when set beside the Beatitudes. This passage is from the period in ancient Israelite history when they are still wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. They have their freedom from slavery, but they have not yet entered into the Promised Land. Moses is preparing them for that by reminding them of the commandments that God has given them. Now directly before this passage, in Deuteronomy 27, we have a reiteration of the Ten Commandments (which already appeared in Exodus 20). And this passage then says what the consequences are for either obeying God’s laws (blessings) or disobeying (curses or woes). So we are told, “all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God:

3 Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.

4 Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.

5 Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

6 Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.” (Deuteronomy 28: 2-6).

These are quite concrete and appealing blessings, aren’t they? They are simple, they are related to farming and family (healthy babies for humans and livestock alike), they are about travel blessings and having enough bread in one’s bread basket and kneading bowl. These down home blessings sounded downright familiar – are we sure these aren’t the central blessings of our Mennonite tradition, with its emphasis on family, food, and the land? Well, maybe not when it starts to talk about God defeating one’s enemies. And also the curses part. We’re not so comfortable with that part.

In the exact way that it’s laid out the blessings that come with obeying the laws and commandments, Deuteronomy goes on to outline the curses of disobedience: “But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you:

16 Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field.

17 Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

18 Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.

19 Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

20 The Lord will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.

So that’s the formula, folks. Obey God, and you will be blessed. Disobey God, and you will be cursed. Simple, right? Well, it’s tempting to explain the world that way, and sometimes we do. We try to find reasons why someone got sick, like maybe they brought it upon themselves. We judge people who aren’t financially “successful” in our society, saying they’re not trying hard enough. We do this. We forget sometimes that this isn’t the only or the final word the Bible has to say about blessing.

And here’s where it gets interesting, and we need to really look closely at the text. Let’s notice first of all what the middle portion of our Deuteronomy passage says: it’s all about being a blessed people – as in, plural. This is not about individual merit or lack thereof – this is a set of group, community, or even national blessings and curses. These are not about individuals and their self-actualization in our individualistic, consumer context. It reads, “The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you” (v. 9-10).The other thing that we can notice from this middle portion is why the ancient Israelites are blessed: namely, to be set apart from the other nations as God’s holy people. To be revered and feared. Okay, maybe it makes sense why this isn’t our Mennonite Bible within the Bible. Sounds a little harsh, doesn’t it?

Well, it does, and we’re not the only ones to take issue with it. Already among the biblical writers, even in the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, there were those who disagreed, who added their own, distinct take on why God blessed the ancient Israelites. We see this already way back in Genesis 12, in the story of Abram’s call.

12 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Well, this is different, isn’t it? It’s less about tribal and military intimidation and superiority and more about sharing God’s blessing. Abraham and Sarah are blessed not in order to be the only blessed ones around, but in order to share that blessing with all peoples on earth – as widely as they can. This is more in keeping with the inclusive visions found in the prophets as well, especially Isaiah and Micah, who share the same image of all nations streaming to the mountain of God to learn God’s ways of justice, peace, right relationship, and enough for all (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-4).

And then Jesus comes along with his Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew, and we find ourselves frankly scratching our heads a bit more. Blessed are the poor in spirit? The meek? Those who are mourning? The persecuted? These sound more like the curses section of Deuteronomy than the blessings section! In Luke’s version, this is even more striking as Jesus actually pairs blessings and woes together. So after blessing “the poor,” “the hungry,” “those who weep” and those who are hated and excluded, Jesus issues harsh woes or curses:

“But woe to you who are rich,  
    for you have received your consolation.  
“Woe to you who are full now,  
    for you will be hungry.  
“Woe to you who are laughing now,  
    for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets” (Luke 6:20-26).

This is a closer parallel to Deuteronomy, except with the content seemingly reversed: those who are suffering and marginalized in various ways are blessed by Jesus, whereas those who are wealthy and powerful are correspondingly cursed with woes.

So what’s going on here? Is this some sort of strange opposite day in Jesus’ ministry? Well, yes and no. It is the case that Jesus upends our expectations of what it means to be blessed or cursed, but he does so not against, but in conversation with his Jewish tradition: specifically with God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah that through them, all the families of the earth shall be blessed and with the inclusive, peace and justice vision of the prophets. Jesus doesn’t simply want to reverse those who are blessed or cursed here. He is using reversal to make his audience stop and think, and to encourage them to take action. He is calling those who are blessed to share that blessing with those who are cursed. He is calling for the blessing to be shared until all have enough: all have their own former-sword-turned plowshare, full bread baskets, and their own vine and fig tree.

This is the ultimate message of our summer worship series: as we have been blessed, God is calling us today to share that blessing, to put it into practice, to live it out. We are blessed to be a blessing to others, to share God’s blessing, especially with those on the margins, those who are currently suffering the curses and woes. These blessings are not something we simply wait for from God or enjoy all by ourselves: they are meant to be lived and shared, for the sake of God’s reign of Shalom – justice, peace, and blessing for all people of the earth.

I want to close with Janet Morley’s contemporary translation or paraphrase of the Beatitudes, which I have been using in my sermons.[[2]](#footnote-2) She provides us with a fresh way of hearing these words in such a way that we can begin to think about how we live them out today.

THE BEATITUDES – A Paraphrase

Blessed are those whose spirit has been shaped by poverty; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who are sick at heart to see power abused; for they shall be invited to the feast.

Blessed are those who are not arrogant; for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who are desperate for justice; for they shall eat and drink their fill.

Blessed are the compassionate; for they shall have compassion shown to them when they need it.

Blessed are those who refuse to be corrupted; for they shall not be afraid to come face to face with God.

Blessed are those who take action to bring about peace; for they shall truly be called God’s own.

Blessed are those who carry wounds suffered in the struggle for justice; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

AMEN

1. See Richard Rohr, “Original Blessing,” January 4, 2017, <https://cac.org/original-blessing-2017-01-04/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, Third Ed. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)