

Are You Blessed?
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United Church of Broomfield
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Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵ Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

⁶ They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

⁹ The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?

¹⁰ I the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you^[a] on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “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.

²⁶ “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

The Beatitudes. When we hear the Beatitudes, most of us envision the painting by Carl Heinrich Bloch called “The Sermon on the Mountain,” painted in 1877. It’s a great painting. It’s routinely used when people speak of Jesus’ sermon on the mount in which he taught the Beatitudes. When it comes to the beatitudes though, if we’re being completely honest with ourselves, we love hearing this sermon, but ... it really does make us uncomfortable. Jesus says that,

The poor and those who’ve lost everything are blessed.

Those who are hungry and starving are blessed.

You’re blessed when you’re weeping and defeated.

If you’re excluded, hated, defiled and defame – that’s when you’re blessed.

So, when worship finishes today and we return to our lives, back out into the world, I want all of us to strive to be oppressed, homeless, starving and reviled ... who’s with me?

Why aren’t you raising your hands? Aren’t you Christians? Don’t you believe in Jesus and the words he said? If you were REAL Christians, you’d **want** to be poor and hungry AND that’s what we teach to our church –

not this nonsense about educational advancement, good paying jobs and stable lives with crazy things like houses full of friends and family.

See what I mean? The Beatitudes are both comforting and extremely uncomfortable. In our world, for centuries, many good, truly devout and pious believers, don't aspire to be homeless and hungry. We are taught to have the best, be the best, and want the best because God wants the best for us, right? God wants us to be happy, healthy, and joyous. And success – “the best” - resembles in no way homelessness, poverty or being hated.

Maybe, there is something to an ascetic life. Asceticism is a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from all things pleasurable – money, food, sex, entertainment, you name it – denial of all such things for the purpose of spiritual and religious satisfaction. But I don't think that that is what Jesus intended with the Beatitudes. I believe that an ascetic life can be a gift – it's good for some, but it's not necessarily meant for everyone.

Have any of you heard of a woman named Osceola McCarty? I hadn't either, until I was doing work on this sermon, which is unfortunate. Osceola McCarty (1908-1999), is referred to as, “The late great African-American laundry woman, author, and philanthropist ... For decades, Osceola, a frugal Christian woman who never bought a car - who never got married - who lived in a simple frame home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, earned 50 cents a load doing laundry for the well-to-do families of Hattiesburg!

Preferring to use a washboard instead of an electric washing machine, she toiled for three-quarters of a century as a domestic: washing, ironing, and folding other people's clothing! Her life was an inspiration to many!

Her formal education ended in the sixth grade when an aunt became ill and was paralyzed! Osceola had to quit school so that she could take care of her! She took in laundry to earn money; and, every week she put a little aside in a savings account!

Osceola had a dream - a dream that she never shared with anyone - a dream of getting a higher education - a dream that was never fulfilled for her; but is being lived vicariously through the students that she has and continues to help, even after her death. That dream was revealed when she shocked the University of Southern Mississippi, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1995, with a generous gift of \$150,000 to "help somebody's child go to college."

You see --- that [little bit of] money she had put aside in a savings account for all of those years had grown to \$250,000 with compound interest, which, as she said, "was more than she could use!" She explained, "I can't carry anything away from here with me, so I thought it was best to give it to some child to get an education!" The University of Southern Mississippi used the money to endow the "Osceola McCarty Scholarship USM Foundation" which provides money for African American children of limited means with the opportunity to be able to go to college!

She once told reporters, "It's more blessed to give than to receive - I've tried it!"

Osceola McCarty is a great example of an individual who truly understands what it means to be blessed. Clearly, she lived a meager life, one that some might describe as impoverished and even oppressed. Despite the fact that most of us wouldn't describe Osceola's life as blessed, with what she had (and didn't have), she was able to bless others through extravagant giving.

Jesus' words – The Beatitudes – are both literal and figurative. They are something for us to take very seriously and explore deeper, in such a way that we understand **what** Jesus and God are saying about the blessed and blessings.

Should humanity aspire to be poor, hungry, homeless, abandoned and oppressed? No, not in literal terms because that's not the point – the point is the Beatitudes help us understand God's love and how we live. Understanding in ways that Osceola McCarty did. To truly know **HOW** God loves and to emulate it, knowing those who are *especially* loved by God. In conjunction with the Beatitudes, let us remember that Jesus also said, "...many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Mark 10:31).

Our reading from Jeremiah is a good additional scripture that helps us in our learning of God's love for "the blessed" and understanding what blessed *really* means, according to Jesus.

Jeremiah says that, "**those who trust in the Lord,**" are blessed. The blessed will not be overcome with fear, but will flourish like trees planted by water, having deep roots, growing strong and providing beauty and shade for the benefit of others. The Beatitudes present us with a challenge. Do we TRULY trust in the Lord?

We often say in our personal lives and even in worship that we are blessed. Do we actually understand what we are saying? Are we saying:

* I am blessed because I have a house, I have a family, I have food and security ... ? Is that what we *really mean*? If that **IS** what we mean, I think we don't understand the Beatitudes, nor God's love and guidance. There is nothing wrong with HAVING, but what is it that you have that makes you feel blessed?

How do we view those who are oppressed – those who do not have a house, families, food or security? With sadness, pity and anger? How do we treat people who struggle – with poverty, homelessness, addiction...?

* There's a place for homeless people.

* If they want to eat they could just get a job and work – they're just lazy.

* They'd rather drink and use that be productive citizens, so I'm not giving them any money to contribute to that.

Is it our job to judge and condemn ... or to love and be merciful? Do we even interact with "those people", despite the fact that Jesus assures us that THEY are the ones who are blessed? ---- Where is blessing – for them, for us, for our world in the way we relate to Jesus' blessed?

If we work at seeing people – ALL OF GOD'S CHILDREN - as Jesus does, with unconditional love – how much different our conversation would be about blessings! We'd truly redine our modern understanding of "being blessed." The blessed are blessed because of how they live and love according to God, according to the teachings of Jesus. The blessed are blessed because of how they see, understand and relate to *that which they have*.

* I am blessed because God has given me a heart fully capable of love, of compassion, of sacrifice and generosity.

* I am blessed because I **CAN** love extravagantly.

* I am blessed because I **CAN** give abundantly.

* I am blessed because I have received the undeserved and unconditional grace and mercy of God.

So, you say you're blessed? PROVE IT.

AMEN.