

## BLESSED ARE YOU

Matthew 5:1-8



The first and last truth of your life is this: blessed are you. From before you were born, every second granted to you on this earth and beyond death, eternally, you are embraced in the favor of God. Before ever you drew your first breath until your final exhalation and forever, God who created you holds you in love.

Reflect on the words of the Psalmist speaking for us to God: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the

depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance" (Psalm 139).

And now in your mind's eye see yourself as God saw you then, embraced in your mother's womb, fearfully and wonderfully made.

This is my tenth grandchild, Genevieve, recently arrived on this earth, captured by the miracles of technology almost two months before birth and as you can plainly see already praying. This could have been you before your birth, precious child of God that you were, embraced in the security of your mother's womb and in the love of God.

Probably many of you have read Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, in the form of a memoir by the elderly Rev. John Ames near the end of his life fifty years ago in 1956, writing to his young child who will never really get to know his father. He yearns to leave words that will convey to his son how much he has been loved for no reason other than simply for his being. He says, "You're just a nice-looking boy, a bit slight, well scrubbed and well mannered. All this is fine, but it's your existence I love you for, mainly... [Your mother] has watched every moment of your life, almost, and she loves you as God does, to the marrow of your bones" (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004, pp. 53, 136).

Each of us had persons in our lives like John Ames, persons who not only themselves loved us to the marrow of our bones but connected their love for us with God's. My grandmother who adored me so absolutely there could be no doubt told me the stories of Jesus, that Jesus was God embracing me and drawing me toward a dream of how my life should be, and not only me and my life but every one of us.

You see, those Bible stories she told were not just about "Jesus and me." Recall how many of them implicitly begin: "A certain man had two sons." Of course in our day they would be told also about a mother, and there would sometimes be a son and a daughter or two daughters, but there would never be only one. From Cain and Abel onward, through Isaac and Ishmael, through Jacob and Esau, through Joseph and his ten brothers, through the younger and elder brothers and their father who was the truly prodigal one, pouring out all his wealth and love -- the stories are always about siblings loved and called by God, finding out who they were and living out their destinies in the interplay of siblinghood.

When I was a child my parents did not go to church, but since clearly everything about this Jesus required a body of believers living into the truth of God's love for all, as a very young child I found my way to a neighborhood Methodist church for Sunday school and worship, seeking the answer to the question: who will be my people? Now lest you think I am trying to tell you that I was a

paragon of virtue as a child or that I am as an adult, I could be just as combative as the next person and truth to tell still can be.



My father did some boxing and as you can see he believed in the Proverb, "Train up the child in the way she should go." While I work hard to ensure that there is no similar photo at the age I am now, trust me, that dynamic still lives in my soul. I'll return shortly to the fact that loved as we are, we are also all sinners saved by grace. Who are we to be so loved just as we are, and what does such love want of us?

That Methodist church of my childhood offered the typical church experience of the time, with junior choir and youth group and more stories about Jesus illustrated on flannel boards and the words "God is Love" inscribed in colored chalk on the blackboard of the basement Sunday school room. Then sixth grade arrived and along with it the special evening service when my young, already baptized friends with whom I sang and played and learned were welcome to be confirmed into the church.

That evening I sang in the came forward to be received because my parents refused before I left for church to sing enact what I knew in my being embraced by God: to were struggling together to

It was many years before I here was called by God to be a body that does not haunts our age but aims embraces all people. While circles American Baptists everyone drawn by God.

That is your story as well, by the God who created, before ever you knew God's the gifts and goodness your way into ministry among the people known as American Baptists. Yes, God has called you to serve and you will work diligently in that service. You will experience the heights of closeness with God and absolute certainty of living in God's will, and you will live through nights of torment and tears because somehow God seems suddenly distant and some of God's people are behaving in strangely obstreperous ways and you doubt your place in God's plan for this world. But before any of that, as you are at or near the start of living out your call to ministry among American Baptists, perhaps ordained or soon to be; even before you ever started down the road to this destiny or dreamed of this day -- God was blessing you and calling you to embrace God's whole beloved world.



adult choir. The rest of the junior choir into the church but I was not among them permission. My mother took my picture with the adults and watch my friends depths was an essential consequence of be embraced by a body of believers who figure out what it all meant for their lives.

found my people, American Baptists, and serve a people seeking to discern how to abdicate to the spirit of exclusion that toward God's eschatological vision that the world seeks to draw ever narrower work to expand the circle to draw in

blessed, favored from the very beginning sees, knows and loves you just as you are name and what that God expects from all entrusted to you, before ever you found

It must have been that way for the disciples on the day in Galilee when Jesus had just begun his own ministry. This is not ancient Galilee, it's contemporary Brazil, but the truth of Christ's arms outstretched for all is timeless. You know the story, how in rapid succession Jesus baptized by



his cousin John heard the voice of God: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," then was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days of tempting by the devil, set about calling disciples, and "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains,

demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them..." (Matthew 3-5).

The first words Jesus spoke that day to the disciples we know by the name Beatitudes and they experienced as sort of an ordination sermon. Jesus turned from the pressing demands of the world to address those called and committed to be about God's work in such a world. Wouldn't you like to know what Jesus was thinking as he assumed the authoritative seated position that in his culture signaled a teaching moment? On the one hand, the next step in God's mission for this world depended on these folk and they were beloved and chosen by God, but on the other hand they were such a motley crew who would over and over fail to comprehend and just plain fail. Rather like us.

Jesus opened his mouth and spoke: "Blessed are..."

Now from our vantage point we are tempted to hear his words as a conditional statement, that the gift promised in the last half of each beatitude will be ours IF we fulfill the demand of the first half: sort of like the laying on of hands that occurs only after we fulfill all the requirements and make it through the ordination council. Isn't that how the world usually works, that we have to overcome the hurdles before we get to the rewards, we have to pass the entrance exam before we are judged qualified for the work?

But this is Jesus, in whose face we have seen what the beatitudes look like, through whom we are already becoming what he blesses us for being. Make no mistake, this is JESUS, not JABEZ, the promise is not that God wants us RICH but that God wants us READY. Where in the Bible do we read that all God wants of us is spoiled children with hands out for more, that God does not expect those hands to be reaching out to embrace God's world? This is the heart of the matter, the tension between Law or demand and Grace or gift. We know that James veered more to the former and Paul more toward the latter but Matthew's record of the Beatitudes and in fact the whole Sermon on the Mount did not do either because Jesus did not resolve that tension. In fact, Jesus intensified the Law by focusing deeper on the internal, on the spirit and the heart that are mirrored in outward actions, and at the very same time he mediated Grace that it shall be so. This is JESUS.

And this is you and I: The human lot is to live right there, at the intersection of sin in thought, word and deed; and the divine economy of grace that offers transformation through forgiveness and reconciliation so that we can and must try to live as on our own we never could or even want to. For Jesus every failure to live by the picture he painted in the Sermon on the Mount and the picture he painted in his life is missing the mark, in other words, sin, AND in Jesus God is giving us what it takes to be transformed. It is all gift, YET it is all demand.

Miroslav Volf in his book *Exclusion and Embrace* describes succinctly: "Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be made recipients only if we do not resist being

made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in – even our enemies.” How can this be? – as Mary asked the angel Gabriel before she gave space in herself for the birth of God’s new world. How? “There is an asymmetrical dialectic,” Volf says, “between the ‘grace’ of self-donation and the ‘demand’ of truth and justice. Grace has primacy...” (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 129, 29).

So let me take the liberty of speaking to you this day as Jesus might speak to very human disciples called up and committed to lead in his way of arms outstretched to embrace God’s world. Every day and not just at the start of ministry, each one of you will default to original sin and fail to make space for the others, thereby shutting yourself out of the kingdom of heaven, which simply means relationship with God and others. You will fail and must come empty-handed before God to seek the miracle of resurrection all over again. You will come “poor in spirit” because you will be deeply in touch with your own insufficiency. You will come “pure in heart” because you will long for the integrity of desiring transparency before God and your siblings.

This acknowledgement of sin, this repenting and returning to God – it is all inner work but you cannot do it alone. Why ever would you believe that the work of embracing God’s people and leading a community to learn to embrace rather than exclude can be accomplished by you in your lonely solitude? One would expect that all the Bible stories about sibling relationships, always about God and me AND my sisters and brothers, would convince you that this road you journey as a pastoral leader is not for Lone Rangers. Maybe you think that the leadership role creates exceptions, you must be a lonely hero or heroine and go it alone, you do not need companions of the way. I am here to tell you – and mark these words if you remember nothing else: you cannot afford to live a life alone in ministry. Jesus chose twelve, the ideal small group size; he sent them out two by two. All of the research screams that ministers desperately need friends; you need to be in covenant groups with colleagues where holy friendships are formed to provide support so you do not burn out, and accountability so you do not wander into misconduct, and community in which your spirit and your heart will be opened so that God can transform you.



Listen to the testimony of a colleague long ordained but only recently in a collegial covenant group: “The study and sharing have provided numerous opportunities to evaluate and improve my practice of ministry. This has all been valuable and good! But the most important aspect of this experience for me has been the friendships that have developed – the deep, sincere, supportive, caring friendships that have put spark back into my life. I don’t think I am alone in often feeling lonely in ministry. This experience has opened me to a deeper awareness of how rarely I

have just had ‘fun’ with a group of friends since leaving the warm friendships that sustained and entertained me during my three years in seminary. Our Together in Ministry group has not only studied and shared wisdom and faith with one another, but we have been able to have ‘fun’ together – to fool around, to be silly, to just play together in an atmosphere of acceptance and freedom. Last spring we agreed to escape to a couple of cabins in a nearby state park for a two-day retreat together – a time just to play. While reflecting on that experience, I literally wept at the realization that I had not been immersed in that kind of social interaction since my days in seminary some twenty-seven years ago! Over those many years, I had forgotten how important just having fun is to one’s spiritual life. My Together in Ministry group has been a sustaining experience for me. It has not only enlivened my ministry, but even more important, it has enlivened my life.”

This from a gifted and brilliant colleague who had been standing aloof and alone in the busyness of the Father's business, and not coincidentally had been resisting leading his congregation to reach out to embrace their community. Bonded together, sometimes in laughter for the joy of it all and sometimes in tears for the heartbreak of it all – that is where spirits and hearts are opened for God to transform us. Once he was embraced in holy friendships with colleagues everything changed for him. Transformed himself, he has engaged his congregation in transforming their piece of the world.

Blessed are you. From the small circle of the womb where your life began to the vast circle of this gorgeous blue marble earth that holds everything you hold precious, God is at work in you to create a world that embraces all God's people, each and every one, no matter who they are. God's seeing and embracing you is transformed into your seeing and embracing God's world, this whole blessed creation groaning in travail to be born into all things made new.



Some words of John Ames in *Gilead*: “Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it... Love is holy because it is like grace – the worthiness of its object is never what really matters” (pp. 66, 209).

**Credit**

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Some words of Miroslav Volf: “The Spirit of God breaks through the self-enclosed worlds we inhabit; the Spirit re-creates us and sets us on the road to becoming...personal microcosms of the eschatological new creation” (p. 51).

Some words of Jesus Christ: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Amen.

Kate Harvey  
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