

St. Andrew's Cathedral
Jackson, Mississippi
Sermon for February 17, 2019 ~ Epiphany 6C
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I often encounter someone I do not know who speaks to me and says, "Hello." I usually respond, "Hi! How are you?" The responses vary: "I'm fine and how are you?" "Great, thanks." "Not bad. You?" are some of the most common responses. But there is one in particular that always causes me to take a second look at the person who says it. When someone says to me, "I'm blessed," I usually pay more attention to that person. And, you know what? Most of the time, what I notice about the person is that, in spite of saying, "I'm blessed," he or she does not appear at all prosperous, or in good physical health, or carefree. Most of the time, the one who says, "I'm blessed" is bent over, has calloused hands, worn clothes, missing teeth, a walking cane, or some combination of those characteristics.

The blessedness they seem to possess stands in sharp contrast to the sense of blessing often spoken of by those of us who use the word to describe our way of life. We see the same contrast in our readings from Jeremiah and Luke and in Psalm 1. On the one hand there are those who are blessed by God. On the other hand, the blessed ones stand in dramatic contrast to the ones whom Jeremiah describes as "those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength," whom the Psalmist calls the "wicked," and whom Jesus refers in to the Beatitudes as those who are "rich," "full," "laughing," and "popular."

So, if our prosperity, comfort, happiness, and popularity aren't blessings, what is?

The idea of blessing and happiness in the Bible is different than our autonomous American ideal of putting ourselves first. It is different from the so-called prosperity gospel, the idea that God is a kind of Santa Claus who rewards us when we are good, while the naughty ones are like a dry shrub in the desert or the chaff that the wind blows away. And the biblical idea of blessedness is different from the notion that, if things in your life aren't prospering, then you must not have enough faith.

God's blessing upon God's people is a major biblical theme. The word "bless" and words derived from that root appear 517 times in the Hebrew and New Testament Scriptures. And, one translation of the New Testament (ESV) contains 112 references with the words bless, blessing, or blessed, *none of which* connects blessing to material prosperity. "Blessed" in Jeremiah and Psalm 1 is a translation for the Hebrew word *esher* (אֲשֵׁרִי), which means "happy is the one." The Greek word translated *blessed* in the gospel is *makarioi* (μακάριοι), which means "fully satisfied."

Jeremiah bids readers to align their communal life with the patterns of God, the patterns of wholeness and righteousness, from which flows a blessedness that is not available anywhere else nor subject to any other forces. Likewise, for the Psalmist, God comes first. The happy or blessed ones who meditate on the teaching of God are putting God, not themselves, in the center of their lives. Jesus, in this passage from the Sermon on the Plain, is proclaiming a blessedness that exclaims, "Oh, the joy" of your life when you are poor, hungry, mourning, hated for your faith, because your life comes not from transitory things but from God alone.

Blessedness is not a reference to a system of rewards in which good things come to us if we do everything God commands us to do. We know that good things come to people who don't walk in the ways of God. We also know - most of us from personal experience - that bad things come to those who do. The blessedness of the Bible is not about rewards for good behavior.

The benefits of blessings are secondary. The primary function of a blessing is *living in relationship with God*. Those who delight in the teaching of God are not guaranteed that benefits will result from this relationship. In fact, the blessing comes first and transcends the good and the bad. They are blessed (happy, filled with joy) because of the relationship created between them and God, a relationship that can provide them – provide us – with a source of life so that we can be like trees planted by streams--in other words, close to a body of water that can provide nourishment so that we can stay alive and even bear fruit during the droughts or disasters that come with life.

This is the blessing declared in our Baptism. In this Church, we Baptize people of all ages because we believe that regardless of the chronological age of the person receiving the Sacrament, we all come to the font as helpless infants who do not deserve, cannot earn, and may not purchase the love, mercy, and grace of God. God's blessing is freely given. This is also the blessing we receive at the end of every Eucharist before we are sent out into the world to bring God's blessing to others.

In each case, I invite you to lift up your heads and open your eyes to see that something is really happening on the outside that points to the greater thing that is beyond our ability to see. God's blessing is God's free gift to us. Many of us have experienced that blessing most keenly during times of adversity. What may be more difficult is to see God's blessing during times of prosperity because it is then that we are most tempted to feel autonomous, self-sufficient, and just fine on our own, thank you very much.

So, whether you are poor or prosperous, hungry or well fed, weeping or laughing, persecuted or popular, the blessing of God is upon us. Our spiritual resilience relies on turning again and again, day and night, to bask in that blessing that sustains us no matter what. The comfort, peace, and joy that flows from God's blessing doesn't make us morally superior to others. *The blessed are those who remain open to living in a relationship with God that includes God's teaching and God's will for us*. This is to experience eternal life. They do not turn their hearts away from God and nor look to transitory things for their strength. The words of the Prophet and the Psalmist anticipate the Beatitudes of Jesus:

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. 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. – Jeremiah 17:7-8

Maybe those people I meet who are poor, hungry, sad, or marginalized who respond to my inquiry about their well being, "I'm blessed" know something about which I need to be reminded. "How happy are you for the realm of God where all your real needs are met is yours."

I'm reminded of the story of a king who sent one of his servants on a mission to find a ring that would make a sad person happy and a happy person sad. He search and searched. Finally one day in a far away village marketplace, he asked a merchant if he had such a ring. The merchant smiled and handed him a ring, which he said was *the* ring for which he had been searching – a ring that would make a sad person happy and a happy person sad. On the ring was this inscription, "This too shall pass."

Whatever your circumstances today, things will change for good or for ill. But the life giving, joyful life of God in whom you live and move and have your being, abides. And it will sustain you today, tomorrow, and forever.