

*Based on Matthew 5:1-12. Blessing the Un-Blessable.*

There was a time in my life, maybe ten years ago, when things were really hard, and I could not see how they were going to get better. Lots of people gave advice, as people want to do, and some of it was well-meaning, and some of it was awkward, and some of it was downright bad. In the midst of it all, one piece of wisdom was so profound I return to it every time a whiff of despair whirls my way:

*Every morning when you arise, take the time to write down three things in your life that you just can't do anything about: good, bad, or otherwise. They are what they are, whether you wish they were, or not. And then, every evening, before you go to bed, take the time to write down three things in your life you are grateful for: small or large, profound or profunctory. They can be ongoing or recurring or a one-time event and now they're gone. And then, once you have been doing this for a while, compare the two lists, and see what you notice.*

Which I did. And still do. Lo and behold, it turned out then - as it still does now - the things I have absolutely no control over, the things I often wish were not the case but cannot do anything to change, the things I even wail and gnash my teeth against, often turn out to be the source of greatest blessing:

A debilitating illness brings an outpouring of love and support from family that I always thought I had to earn but instead is just *there* as a gift of grace; a personal finance disaster brings compassion for those who have far less of a social safety net and a commitment to *pay it forward* when financial stability returns; a temporary cognitive impairment brings profound meditative silence and the experiential knowledge that the Spirit *really does* pray within us *with sighs to deep for words to express* ... and that we can do the same for others simply by sitting in silent solidarity with them through their suffering.

Lo and behold, it really does turn out that the things we have no control over, the things we often wish were not the case but cannot do anything to change, the things we even wail and gnash our teeth against, *can* turn out to be the source of blessing, if we are willing to look for it.

This is, in some ways, what Jesus is trying to say in this prologue to the Sermon on the Mount we know as the Beatitudes. *Look* for the blessing, Jesus is saying, to the hungry and thirsty and pure, even when it feels like all hope has been lost. *Wrestle* a blessing from your circumstances, Jesus is saying, to the mourners and the poor in spirit and the peacemakers, even when it feels like nothing good can come from them. *Insist upon* a blessing, Jesus is saying, to the meek and the persecuted and the reviled, even when it feels it has been stolen from you. Never give up on the blessing of God, Jesus is saying, to the poor, the captive, the oppressed, because the blessing of God is never giving up on you!

In the context of Matthew's Gospel, the Beatitudes expand the invitation Jesus began in last week's Lesson, when he strolled along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, saying to anyone who will listen, *God wants to make the world well, don't you want to be part of it?* This week, Jesus tells those who have said yes, emphatically, to that invitation, that the wellness of the world *begins with them*, with *their* capacity to believe in *their own* blessedness, *no matter what!*

Which is not to say we should seek out suffering in order to merit that blessing or that we should accept the unjust suffering of others as “God’s will for which they will be rewarded.” It is simply to say that if we really want to join Jesus on this journey of making the world well, we might want to gear up for the backlash that will ensue, and learn from him how to transform that backlash into a blessing. It is also to say that as we learn from Jesus how to transform backlash into blessing what we will find in the end is that the blessing knows no bounds and that gratitude for grace refuses to be mollified.

In other words, *it will be worth it!*

But that is not all.

Over the long haul, as I have compared the lists of gratitude with the lists of frustration over months, years, and now up to a full decade, lo and behold it turns out those things I thought I had to accept as *just the way things are* began to shift. Entrenched sexism in my family and in the church gave way to muted respect and then adamant affirmation. A medical issue I feared would be lifelong and chronic finally responded to a wide range of treatment options. Justice issues I had devoted my ministry to for years without getting much traction seemingly overnight took on national prominence. Lo and behold it turns out those things I thought I had to accept as *just the way things are* began to shift. Profoundly.

Which is what Jesus also offers in this blessing to people who are really tired of being poor - in spirit *and* in their pocketbook - and who are really tired of being hungry and thirsty - for justice *and* for food - and who are really tired of being persecuted and reviled - for Jesus *and* for lack of political power. Yes, there is a blessing within it all right now, in the moment, Jesus is saying. *AND* the way things are right now do not have to be the way things will always be. God really is making the world well - *through us* - even when we cannot see it just yet.

This is no small encouragement, this collection of blessings at the beginning of a sermon that will challenge them - and us - to the highest possible ideals of non-violent, radical justice and love. This is the very foundation of our mission: beautifully and profoundly blessed by God in order to be a blessing to the world.

May we claim that blessing deep in our souls today.