

Sermon, All Saints' Sunday, November 6, 2016

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“Why, why, why?” I was an inquisitive child, apparently so much of one that years later my parents would remark about how I tired them out with my questions. I’ve had bosses tell me the same thing.

I was also a child that loved books and stories, including fairy tales, and one of my favorites was a real puzzle to me. It was *Beauty and the Beast*.

Why would the father send his daughter off to live with the Beast just to protect himself?

Why did Beauty volunteer to go live with the Beast? Was she afraid to go live in the Beast’s castle?

And what was up with the Beast? He was ugly and scary, but he was also nice and patient.

And of course, the big puzzle – why did the Beast suddenly turn into a handsome Prince? The answer to that, of course, was that Beauty grew to love him and said that she would marry him. And that love changed him into the handsome prince. Like all the fairy tales, it was “poof” – he was a Beast then he was a prince. Poof.

But in real life it isn’t poof. It’s a process that even has a grand theological name - sanctification. It is, in the words of Frederick Buechner, the process of turning a

sow's ear into a silk purse.<sup>1</sup> The process of turning a beast into a prince. It's a process though not a "poof."

Jesus is all about this process, the spiritual journey of life...learning to love God, ourselves, and others.

And along comes today's Gospel - Luke's version of the Beatitudes, or blessings.

What does it mean to be blessed? A blessing in the Bible conveys into my life the power and vitality of the one giving it, and the life giving power of God in whose name the blessing is given. I am conveying to you the power of my life and loves.<sup>2</sup> An outward sign of a blessing is often a mark, perhaps a touch or the laying on of hands. Today we too often confuse blessing and luck. But to my mind, luck has too much of the "poof" to it, too much magic and fairy tale. Blessing means that I carry you with me.

"I can see it on others when I really look," my friend Nancy Boyle taught me. "It's right there on their forehead, the sign of the cross, 'sealed and marked as Christ's own forever.'" The saints that we remember today, saints of the church, the saints gone and still alive in our lives, they have it. You do too.

It's important to note who Jesus is speaking to in today's passage. Just prior to where our passage begins, we are told that Jesus has come down from a mountain "to a level place, "and that there is "a great crowd of his disciples and a multitude of people". This "great crowd of disciples" included the 12 disciples, but also others. The laos, the laity, those people who were following him and who were responsive to his message. They are us.

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick, "Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC", HarperSanFrancisco, 1973, pg. 104.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg. 13.

What can we make of these Beatitudes, or blessings?

A couple of things, I think. Remember that God has a preference for the poor, the lowly, the least likely to win. It's throughout the Old Testament. Jacob the scoundrel. Abraham and Sarah – just ordinary people, and quite old to boot. David, the youngest and the smallest. And in the New Testament, the poor teenaged girl named Mary who embraced the angel's message and proclaimed:

[God] has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.

Luke sides with God in this preference for the poor and the outcast by emphasizing it in Jesus' life and teaching. Luke puts it as Jesus' first teaching, in Chapter 4. Jesus sits to teach and reads from the prophet Isaiah (61):

<sup>18</sup>“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

Jesus teaches God's preference for the poor. And he embodies it in his life. To understand who Jesus is, look at where he is and who he's with. It's throughout Luke's gospel.

Luke says “Blessed are the hungry.” Luke is literal and blunt. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the hated, the lonely.

Luke has told us who is blessed, and he could have stopped there for my money. But he didn't. He moves from the 4 blessings to the 4 woes. The woes are the opposites of the blessings. The opposite of a blessing is a curse.

Cursed are you who are rich; who are well fed, cursed are you who laugh, cursed are you when people speak well of you.

That's us. I don't like being cursed.

What are we to do with this - these blessings and woes? What are we to do with this Jesus? To go and live in his kingdom is frightening.

Does Jesus want us to give up all that we own, our possessions, our family, eating our fill in nice restaurants? Honestly, I don't know. I just don't know. I can't stand up here and say "sell everything you have," because I'm not sure that is Jesus' point.

What I do know is that Jesus wants this teaching to become our lives. Jesus wants this teaching to re-order how I live my life. He doesn't want me to be so preoccupied with my possessions or my stature that I fail to respond to God's outstretched hand offering love for all. And that I fail to stretch out my hand to others.

What I know is that learning to do that is a process into a way of life. Early Christianity was actually called "the way". It wasn't called "the poof." It is a way of life, a life-time of being molded and formed as Christians.

How do we learn it? John and I have a new grandson. How will he learn to be a part of our family? He'll hang out with us and learn how we live and love together. How do we learn to be Christian? The same way. We hang out with other Christians; we show up. We come to worship, we are in community. It's long and often messy. It is not easy. I often fail. But it is how we move from being rich and well fed to being sources of richness and sustenance for others.

We who have so much are being asked to live this way, this Christian way. To live in community with gratitude and generosity. When this church says that giving of your time, talent, and financial resources is a spiritual issue for each of us this is what we mean. It is living a life in community preoccupied with gratitude and generosity of time, spirit, and resources; a life preoccupied with love and concern. It's a life of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Jesus is telling his disciples in today's story, and he is telling us, that the way ahead will not be easy. This way of life is not the way of the culture – it wasn't 2000 years ago and it isn't today. This way of life means that we need each other – the disciples needed each other and so do we need each other. "You can't be a Christian by yourself," my mother said. And she was right.

Jesus is encouraging his disciples and us that how we order our lives and how we treat each other makes a difference. We will renew our baptismal vows in a few minutes. These questions are asking us – what are your priorities? How will you treat others?

This matters for our own spiritual journey, and it matters to the world around us. We influence people and our communities for good or ill. We can be a blessing to others and the communities we live in, or we can be a curse. We can spread hatred, fear, and ill-will, or we can spread love, generosity, and compassion. We choose how we influence the world.

We need to look for the cross on one another's foreheads. And we need to remember the one on our own. Looking for it, living into it, it takes a lifetime of choosing to love and bless. In this fractured and fearful time in our country, it is even more important. This country needs us to choose love and blessing.

Jesus teaches God's preference for the poor, the hungry, the least likely. And he embodies it the blessings he conveys to all. To understand who Jesus is, look at where he is and who he's with.

May it also be true of me, O Lord.