

## EPIPHANY SIX, YEAR C, FEBRUARY 13, 2022

Are you all familiar with the use of the hashtag or # sign in front of a word? The hashtag is used in social media to identify similar messages on a specific topic or theme with that word or phrase. If you were to type in #blessed you'd be surprised at what comes up. Instagram alone has 138 million hits for that hashtag. How it is used is also interesting. For instance; Found the perfect parking spot. #blessed...My favorite ice cream is on sale. #blessed. Blessed hashtags are so common place that according to linguist Deborah Tannen "blessed is used now where in the past one might have said lucky.

In many respects the word has become overused. One critic stated that it's used almost like a "self-congratulatory achievement where you're invoking holiness to brag about your life. Calling something 'blessed' has become the go-to term for those who want to boast about an accomplishment while pretending to be humble, fish for a compliment, acknowledge a success all without sounding too conceited". The other reality is that blessed has become so overused for trite things that it has trivialized and lessen its meaning. As one person put it, "Now, it's just like strawberries are half price at Trader Joe's. I feel so blessed."

It really comes down to the meaning of the word blessed and what we perceive it to mean. If someone is blessed to have a job does that mean the person who doesn't is cursed? How does blessing really work? When we say blessed, we typically refer to circumstantial happiness or fortune. We equate it with the good life, whatever that would be for us: a loving partner, a successful career, an excellent education, obedient children, healthy body, trusted friends, financial abundance. This is what prosperity theology preaches that if you have all those things you are blessed. But does having these things really make you blessed? Because what if you don't have them? Is the opposite true? Are you not blessed or are you cursed?

In today's Gospel, Luke's version of the beatitudes does leave us with a lot of questions about what Jesus was saying. More than any other gospel, Luke is concerned with issues of wealth and poverty. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus seems clear that wealth and privilege are real dangers that have the power to separate one from God and from the human community. It defies everything they were taught that God's blessing is seen in those who have abundance and those who don't are cursed. But here, Jesus spells out the woes of which the comfortable and wealthy better beware while raising up those who are poor and grief stricken as being blessed.

It seems farfetched to say that those who experience poverty and hunger and grief and exclusion could count any of these as blessings. I doubt anyone on social media would ever use the hashtag blessed and say, "Choosing between paying rent and buying needed medications. #blessed." How can Jesus say these are the blessed ones?

When Jesus uses the word blessed in Luke, it's the Greek word makarios which means "favored by God" or fully satisfied, regardless of the circumstances, even if one is hungry or outcast or poor or grieving. Jesus wants us to realize that the kingdom of God is not just for those who have everything but belongs to even those who have nothing except God.

The catch is the beatitudes are not advice nor are they judgements about what we should or shouldn't do. The Beatitudes simply tell us who we are and where we are. In

Luke, this version of the Beatitudes is known as Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Unlike in Matthew where the Beatitudes are general statements, using they and those, Luke's version is addressed directly to the people who were there. It tells us that the audience included both people who benefited from the status quo and those who suffered from it. They are all there together: poor/rich, hungry/full, weeping/laughing, rejected/-accepted, hearing the blessing and the hope; hearing the woes and warnings.

They were all seated, mixed together on the plain and Jesus leveled the playing field by lifting the lowly, challenging the elite; comforting the afflicted, afflicting the comfortable. Jesus is teaching us that we are all connected. We are not isolated individuals making posts about how great our life is on social media without concern of how our lives affect others. We are not separated from one another with what we classify as fortune or its opposite. We are, all of us, from all parts of the world gathered with Jesus on a plain level listening to a new way of thinking that honors those discarded, that lifts up weakness as power and forgiveness as strength. This is the exact opposite, as I said, of prosperity theology which says "blessing" is health, wealth, and happiness. That theology domesticates the radical nature of the beatitudes.

The beatitudes, more importantly, tell us about God. They are about who God is and what the kingdom of God is like. They tell us what matters to God, who is especially important to God, and they tell us what God pays attention to. Bottom line, they are an announcement of God's agenda. They signal to both the rich ones and the well fed and the laughing and the insiders that in order to participate in God's new kingdom, we need to align our lives and priority with God's new order. You can't just look at yourselves and say, look what I've got, rather it's looking at those who don't have a lot and figure out how we balance out the inequities and inequalities in our own small ways.

The truth is we're all there in our different social conditions and life circumstances: rich and poor, hungry and fed, mourning and laughing, insiders and outsiders. We're all there knowing that life is fragile and that our situations could change at any moment. Whether we think life is quite random - who gets diagnosed with diseases and who gets promoted with raises - or whether we recognize that patterns of privilege and structural inequities impact humans' ability to flourish, or whether we blithely ascribe advantages to luck and disadvantages to lack of effort, and even if we see life as little of all of these things, we're all there. We're all gathered on the plain with Jesus, receiving blessings and hope or listening to woes and warnings to pay attention to God's kingdom that transforms life as we know it.

When we trust God above all human-made systems our lives will be blessed. To trust in this new vision is not just a passive belief. Trust is acted out by our actions and deeds. We need to take the initiative and control of our lives and not let the world dictate to us or squeeze us into a mold that continues the same old same old. We need to listen carefully to what is in our hearts and follow that voice which tells us to trust in God.

Perhaps I can illustrate this point by a story about a former parishioner. She has two daughters and one day when they were very young her youngest asked her, "Where does God live?" Janine believed she had a very good answer and leaned over to her daughter pointed to her heart and said God lives right in there. Kathleen blurted out "I don't want him in there!" Janine asked, "Why not". Kathleen replied, "Because he's bugging me!" When we listen well to our hearts, we hear God bugging us about what the equality of God's kingdom really looks like.

And it's in that moment that we realize it is not ours to determine who is blessed and who is not, including ourselves. It's Jesus who pronounces blessing, and his pronouncement of who is blessed cuts across our sensibilities, so counter-cultural that we are often uncomfortable. The blessing of God is not found in our worldly circumstances but in our attitude before God who desires healing peace for all of the world that God so loves.

Jesus encourages this attitude to trust in God's redemptive love. Maybe the better hashtag for us as followers of Christ is not so much *#blessed* as much as it is *#grateful*. In gratitude for God's grace, may we align our lives with God's vision of the kingdom and find the blessing inherent in that. Amen.