

“Circlin’ ‘round on blessed”
Isaiah 58: 1-12 Matthew 5: 1-16

I call myself a nice Midwestern girl, transplanted to the east, but I’m actually a southern girl at heart... I was born south of the Mason Dixon line, began school there, and spent formative summers on the Eastern shore. Many of my friends and family members live in the south, and I’ve spent weeks each year for a few years now in Texas working on my doctorate in ministry. Yes, I call myself a nice Midwestern girl, but I’m actually a southern girl at heart...So, when you’ve spent time in the south like I’ve been spending time in the south and you hear a text like the text we read today, you really have to circle ‘round on blessed. Because it seems to me that in the south, blessed can take on a really different meaning. I call it, “Southern nice.” It has something to do with *feeling extra-blessed*.

Now, you might know what Southern Nice means, or you might be able to recognize it if I tell you a story about my Aunt Sue. Aunt Sue has this thing about wanting to share what it means to be blessed? She’ll walk right up to a new neighbor’s house with her red checkerboard-cloth-covered basket filled with a batch of her famous chocolate chunk cookies and just as their moving van pulls away and surprise that family with a visit. Now, she’d say that she’s just being neighborly. But you and I know Aunt Sue, don’t we? She’s *about the nosiest neighbor* on the block.

As soon as the lady of the house opens the door wide, Aunt Sue’s looking at all those boxes piled high, eyeing the sofa and matching chairs...yes, Aunt Sue *says* that she’s just being hospitable, but when she gets back to her own house the first thing she’ll do is pick up the phone. “Bless her heart,” she’ll report, “I’ve never seen such a large pattern on wing chairs before! And you better look out for her children. - Four of them running around not even stopping to shake my hand. Bless her heart! I just don’t know how she’s gonna make it in this town.” That’s what I call Southern Nice: exhorting God’s blessings as code for, “Oh, my! Do you not realize...”

My Aunt Sue is not unique. We all have our thoughts about what it means to be blessed. It could be a tangible blessing like the job you always dreamed of, or one that was offered just before you ran out of money. It could be the blessing of an extended family, or an advanced education, or maybe good health. I’m sure Alberta felt blessed when her tour group was able to leave Cairo during the early stage of the revolt and head for the safer soil of Jordan. But then there are the intangible blessings such as how you’re cared for by your community or maybe how you can sense in the darkness of the hour the very presence of God. Each of these blessings are gifts from God for the people of God, emanating from God’s greatest gift of love.

But when Jesus went up that mountain and began to talk with his disciples and the great crowd assembled below, he was talking about an altogether different sort of blessing. While the word he used, *makarios* in Greek, is easily translated as “blessed” in our English language, the ancient language offers a much more textured meaning. As we take a closer look at this word, *makarios*, we’ll find that the blessings Jesus was speaking of in these first words from his Sermon from the Mount were not intended to communicate a list of possibilities of

what might make someone feel happy. New Testament scholar, Eugene Boring, claims that for Jesus, the word "blessed" was actually intended to mean the opposite *not* of "unhappy," but to communicate the opposite of "cursed." Ones who hear themselves pronounced blessed by the Lord are not simple, happy folks. They don't walk around naming the countless ways God shows God's love for them. They realize that the blessings Jesus described have an ethical component. What I mean to say is that the ones who realize that they are blessed by God are the ones who act with a mind toward the beloved kingdom. When they consider the blessings of which Jesus spoke, they hear a command to bring into reality all that he declared. As *we* hear nine categories of those blessed, the meek, the peacemakers, the poor...we are to hear not nine different kinds of people who'll receive their reward in heaven. We are, according to Boring, to hear nine declarations about how people who're living in anticipation of God's reign live - as contemplatives, as peacemakers, as humble in spirit...

Because *we* are the salt of the earth! (That's not just another expression that gets overused, or inappropriately applied, or maybe even worn out!) When Jesus was speaking of us being the salt of the earth, the story was actually building. It was building from a message for each one of those gathered and the blessed way we're called to live as individuals and moving into a declaration for the whole of the gathering before him to live as a collective, expansive mine of salt channeling deep along the expanse of God's creation. We are the salt of the earth! This wasn't a toss away expression. It held deep meaning in Christ's time.

In Christ's time, salt was used for a lot purposes, just like today. Of course, salt had the role as a flavor enhancer for foods. But salt also had the role of sealing a covenant between people who then sprinkled salt as a symbolic acknowledgement of the agreement's acceptability. Jews used salt as a form of currency, to clean blood from meat, and to aid in healing and therapy (kind of like Epsom salts). Jews like Jesus considered salt to be a flavor enhancer, a covenant sealer, a fail-safe healer and an incorruptible element in purification and cleansing.

Jesus looked down the mountain at all those people sitting on the ground, watching and listening for the Word they needed to hear. When Jesus looked down the mountain and called the people salt, they would have heard a charge to be the key ingredient to strengthen the expression of flavors found in the life experiences Jesus described. They would've heard that they are blessed members of the community called to be the preservatives of faith. They would've heard that they are blessed members of the community called to be a life-giving symbol, apart from which their society could neither flourish nor continue. They would have heard that they are called just as we are still called to be a people of blessing - salt of Jesus' earth community - to preserve the world from pain and lift people up from sadness in all of those ways and times when we're suffering, or feeling alone, or finding ourselves in a position of want. Christ used salt as a metaphor to encourage each one of them that day, and each one of us today to enhance and strengthen not only our community but the world. Because without salt, the church loses its efficacy as a sacred body that transforms lives in this world.

By now you've heard me reference the Dutch-born Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen. In addition to being a beautiful writer of Christian inspiration some of which I've shared in meetings and worship at First Pres, Nouwen worked with different communities around the world. What surprised me was that even Henri Nouwen went through a period of dissatisfaction in his life when he didn't know what he was being called to do. It was during this period of dissatisfaction that Nouwen received an invitation from a fellow priest to come

live in L'Arche, a community of severely handicapped people in Canada. In his retelling of the story, Nouwen remembered that the priest he was speaking with didn't say, "Come help us, or come serve us." Instead, the priest said, "Maybe our people can offer you a home." This struck Henri as different and welcoming. He decided to accept the priest's offer and move to L'Arche for one year.

Nouwen describes his feelings upon arrival at L'Arche. He was shocked to see the depth and breadth of disabilities. "You gotta be kidding me!" he thought as he was given his housing assignment to live with Adam, a severely handicapped young man he would need to bathe, and cloth, and feed. One morning during Nouwen's ritual brushing of Adam's teeth, he felt reminded that Christ had said, "Blessed are the poor. Not blessed are those who serve the poor." In that moment, it dawned on him that the poor carry a blessing and that maybe the poor in mental and physical abilities were carrying a blessing for him that, were he not open to receiving, he would likely miss. Maybe, he thought, by living with Adam and others with such poverty of capabilities, he would be able to get in touch with whatever poverty of his own. This would be a blessing that would enable him to receive Christ's blessing, too. Through this experience that actually extended many years into his life, Nouwen learned that in order for us to live a life as blessed we have to live out our lives with one another. As we live out our lives with the rich, we will see our own riches. And as we live out our lives with the poor, we will see our own poverty. He realized that this exchange of riches and poverty is, itself, a true blessing that encourages us to bind with Christ's beloved kingdom on earth.

Our blessings are not only the gifts we receive -those tangible and intangible gifts we receive from God like a job or a restful night or incredible talent or a certain circle of friends. Our blessings are what we do for one another, and our blessings are who we *are* with one another. Our blessings are not only what we *give* from our relative position of wealth but what we *become* from sitting with someone in his poverty and from sharing our poverties, too. True blessings grow from taking the time to learn from someone how his need has added meaning to his life. True blessings grow from taking the time to learn through sometimes awkward or uncomfortable situations like the brushing of a severely handicapped man's teeth, or more simple scenarios as sitting with someone through her tears to learn where the offering is coming from. It's a form of reciprocal charity in the exchange of blessings that strengthens our worldly society into true communities of faith.

How are our lives blessed by God? Are your blessings ones you can put your finger on or ones that you can hardly get your mind around? Do you realize that God has blessed your life in special, unique ways? Even through the most challenging moments...Christ asks us to recognize our blessings and let them shine through us as a beacon of God's grace in glory to God. Because how we characterize our blessings and how we add them up has great bearing on whether we're able to reflect Christ's light upon the world.

In Martha Grace Reese's popular book, *Unbinding the Gospel*, we can learn that this is a Christian's task. Our task is to take the time to count *all* of the ways we are blessed -the specific and the general. Draw a picture of a pitcher and fill it in to the brim with words that describe the ways you are blessed by health and family, certainly but also by those who show you *your* poverties while you show them your riches. Once you see that your pitcher is overflowing with blessings of every sort, even those blessings you'd not considered before, you won't be able to contain it. You'll be so filled with gratitude for all that God has poured so

abundantly into your life that you'll want to share it with the world. You'll want to prepare food for those who are hungry. You'll want to lend mercy to those who are miserable. You'll want to do your own version of standing on a lamp stand as a beacon of God's gracious gifts and lighten the burden for all those in the world whose prospects in life leave them feeling rather dim.

A people of God realizes that the individual is only one grain in the great salt mine of Christ's congregation. Just as God gives each one of us countless blessings, God fills the shaker to the rim with enough blessings to satisfy the world. The church loses its efficacy when we stop using our blessings to hold God's beloved children together. The church falls short of its promise when we fall short of sharing this light with the world.

Not only is it the church's natural, grateful response but it *is* our ethical responsibility to acknowledge and share our blessings with the world. To scatter grains of salt across a vast body of people in need of healing...To scatter grains of salt across a world in waiting to receive the good news...To scatter grains of salt to become millions of points of light across the sky illuminating God's grace across all of the blessed souls whose lives might otherwise seem flavorless and rotting.

As we leave this space, let us go with open hearts and minds for the blessing each one of us holds. Let us go with open hearts and minds for the blessing each one of us has to give. And when we return, may we return a more enriched, shining body of Christ ready to serve in faith as we've been faithfully served. AMEN