

“Blessing, Luck and Privilege”

Matthew 5:1-12

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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We continue our grab bag sermon series, meaning that the topics come from you. A few weeks ago the worship leader picked a piece of paper that said, “I want to hear a sermon about Blessings vs Luck vs Privilege.” Now there are a whole lot more scriptures about blessing than luck and privilege. There is a whole genre of hymnody about blessing. We even say, when we’re asked how we are and we really want to sound pious, “I’m blessed.”

On some level, we are both intrigued and uncomfortable with the concept of blessing. We are intrigued because when one is blessed by God there is clarity. There is a sense of confidence. We all want that clarity—that sense that we’re on the right path, on the right stream, doing what God wants. We need that sense of blessing. And yet, we also know that some folk use “blessing” as a self-righteous crutch saying that if they are wealthy or employed or happy, it’s because God is on their side. This “prosperity gospel” concept of blessing is antithetical to Jesus’ teaching.

I think the question is about how God moves in the world. Do we get things because we are blessed, because we are lucky or because we are privileged? Is there such a thing as coincidence, or is everything controlled by God? After all, Romans 8:28, says “all things work together for good for those who love God”. But is it that simple?

Think of health. Many of us see it as a blessing—when we’re healthy.

Is our health because of our blessing? Did God heal us because we are so righteous? And what if we get sick? Are we cursed?

Is it because of our luck? Are we healthy in spite of our actions? Do our genes have anything to do with it? Think about the chronic smoker who lives into their late 90’s or the nonsmoker who succumbs to lung cancer. Is that the luck of the draw so to speak? Think of people who roll the dice with vaccine hesitancy. Is their health in spite of vaccine luck or blessing? Is their sickness curse, ignorance or bad luck? To paraphrase Tina Turner, “What’s luck got to do with it?”

Or are we healthy because of our privilege? We all know the statistics that say that people of color are more prone to disease, not because of their genes, but because of lack of access to health care. Health care ought to be a right, not a privilege. But our economy has put a price tag on health. Imagine if we did not have to pay for health care. Would we be healthier? Maybe not. Maybe the question is will the poor and people of color and rural folk be healthier.

One of my daughter Becca’s jobs entails calling bingo at a local brewstillery. Ah the things we do to fund theater. She invited me to come and watch her in action. So, I went and learned the ins and outs of the bingo games. It can get downright sophisticated. Different games have different rules. Some can only win with an x shape. Some games require 4x4 postage stamps in the corner. The last game of the night is the all play. Meaning you need to fill in your entire card in a certain number of numbers in order to win the jackpot. If no one wins the jackpot one week, it grows. The night I came, the jackpot was \$1,000. The bar was packed with people trying their hands at this game of chance. I surprised myself and everyone else by completing my card in 57 numbers. It was pure luck. No skill involved except for being able to listen and do

out the correct number. They handed me a wad of cash. I tipped the callers, made some charitable donations and Kim and I had some nice meals out.

Privilege can rear its ugly head and it does. From people of color being suspect to racial profiling, to redlining to simple prejudice, privilege exists in the world. Do you notice that people who benefit from racial/gender/economic privilege often call their privilege luck? Or they might even use the word blessing.

Michael Che was asked by his SNL cohost in an interview if he thought the American political system was broken. His off the cuff response was "No, I think it's fixed." Meaning that it is operating the way it is designed to operate, advantaging the privileged and maintaining that structure in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

I consider this family being dedicated here today. There are four generations in attendance. And they feel blessed. But little Otto, this rambunctious blessing did not come by accident. He was someone prayed for for a long time. Momma Carrie mentioned to me a few weeks ago that she thinks there was some luck and privilege involved in this child. After years of trying and testing, they realized several years ago that they would only be able to conceive using artificial means. And those means are expensive. So was it luck or blessing that they received an inheritance which paid for the invitro treatments? Was it a privilege to have the opportunity to find a way to conceive? Was it luck that it actually took? This little blessing that we share?

Those are hard questions, but important ones.

But I think the more important thing to consider is how we use the blessing, luck and privilege we have received.

Let's unpack the Biblical model of blessing, and see how it is related to luck and privilege.

Very often in the scriptures, we find passages where God or a king or a prophet gives a blessing. I think of when Jacob wrestled with an angel back in Genesis. He wouldn't let the angel go until he received a blessing. Jacob received a limp along with his blessing. It meant that God was on his side, but his past life was ever-present. God didn't simply take away all responsibility or consequence.

Blessings and curses are often put together. Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount has blessings and curses. Some translators call them woes, but the message is the same. Matthew's version is the Robert Schuller "possibility thinking" version. There are no woes, only blessings. Matthew wins for poetry and Luke wins for finger-pointing.

My nephew dove in Lake Phalen five years ago to retrieve his favorite bobber. He got himself tangled in the weeds and almost drowned. But a jogger/lifeguard jumped in and saved him in the nick of time. Was that luck or blessing? We all felt a bit of both and thanked God and the rescuer. Even Lewis felt that he had been saved for a purpose. He told the story and earnestly felt his rescuer as the hands of God. That purpose did not save him from taking his own life six months later. Was he cursed? Or did he just make an impulsive choice that went terribly wrong? That's a question for another sermon, I suppose. And yet it haunts me and those I love.

Blessings, luck and privilege.

The Greek word *makarios* is translated by some people as "blessed are..." by others as "happy or fortunate or joyful are..." In Greek poetic philosophy, *makarios* was often used to signify the attainment of an ideal life.

But the beatitudes give us a counter-intuitive understanding of blessing. There's a reason the Gospel repeats that the last shall be first and the first shall be last theme of the Gospels. If we were to seek to be happy or fortunate, would we use these categories?

It's helpful to notice that Jesus never gives a commandment. He doesn't say, "be poor in body or spirit." Be meek. Be pure in heart. Be a peacemaker. Instead, he begins his most famous sermon by describing who is joyful, blessed. He is describing what happens when we live by the way of Christ—receiving all of the grace and blessing that comes along with it.

How do people say that folks are blessed in today's world?

Think about it: What do our commercials tell us? If you are thin, you can be glamorous. If you have money and have a fancy car, people will fall down at your feet.

What about the church? If you join this church, you will be blessed by God. If you give your money to the latest televangelist, he will pray for you and you will be blessed. Worst of all: If you are perfect, everyone else will recognize it and your troubles will be gone.

And what is the side message to all of this?

If you are poor, it's your own fault.

If you are meek, you are a wimp.

If you are merciful, you are a bleeding heart.

If you are pure in heart, you are boring—only the good die young.

If you are a peacemaker, you are probably a terrorist apologist.

If you are put in jail for standing up against injustice, then you get what you deserve.

And worst, if you are sick in body, mind or spirit, you're cursed.

But remember, Jesus was a radical subversive who wanted us to experience a kind of spirituality that would change us and by extension change those around us, maybe bring this sick world closer to God's purposes.

Jesus opens the sermon on the mount with nine blessings—not to give us a set of commandments to which we must adhere. Rather, he gives us an example of how a Christian life should be led. It's not about luck and privilege. It's about how we live our lives. That's where we are blessed, where God moves in us.

Actually, if the truth be told, Jesus just tells us who receives blessings. He doesn't say anything about how to go about it. That is up to us.

Do not judge yourselves by this world's standards.

Do not compete for a blessing, like Jacob and Esau did in Genesis. But be honest, vulnerable, live with integrity. Be meek, mourn if you must and strive with all your heart, soul and mind to live the kind of life that God wants you to live. Be peacemakers and hunger and thirst for justice.

This is what living blessed lives is all about.

Jesus gives the promises of God: If you live blessed lives, yours is the commonwealth of heaven; You shall be comforted; You shall inherit the earth; You shall be satisfied; You shall obtain mercy; You shall see God; You shall be called the children of God.

This is what being successful is all about. That's what blessing is all about. That's what being born again is all about. And it's what we ought to be teaching to the next generation. As we do so, we might well remind ourselves of the way of blessing.

There is blessing, luck and privilege in our world. There is no denying that. The real questions are:

How do we use our privilege?

What do we do with the luck that has come our way?

How can we bless another?

If we have been spared or advantaged by luck, how does that translate into living our lives?

If we have been given privilege, we have a choice to use it for ill or for good. We can be a blessing or a curse to others. Which will we choose? That's the secret of the beatitudes. The blessings do not come by luck. They don't come by power and privilege. They come because you work at it and point your lives in the best direction.

I encourage you not to try to live blessed lives. I encourage you to recognize the blessedness that surrounds you, like we surround you today. Recognize the blessings from God. Recognize them as rivers that flow through our lives. Receive the blessings from God. And if you are truly blessed by God, then that blessing will bear fruit in service to your fellow sojourners in this life.

Jonathan and Carrie, as you set the household tone for this blessed little one, as yourself with Jesus;

Is there a poverty in your spirit that only God can fill? Do you mourn for the state of our world? Are you one whose will is so surrendered to God? Do you hunger and thirst for justice? Is there some way to be merciful? Is your heart unconfused and undistracted? Are you a peacemaker?

Maybe those are values we can instill on the next generation. If we do that, we will ensure blessing which are more powerful than luck and more redemptive than privilege.

Let me close with a translation of the beatitudes from Minnesota native and Baptist theologian Glenn Stassen:

Blessed are (not the poor in Spirit, but) the humble poor who know their need of God, for theirs is the very Reign of God.

Blessed are (not those who mourn, but) those who are deeply saddened to the point of action, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are (not the meek, but) those whose wills are surrendered to God, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for (not just righteousness, but) restorative justice, for they will be filled.

Blessed are (not just the merciful, but) those who practice compassion in action, for they will receive God's compassion.

Blessed are (not just the pure in heart, but) those who seek God's will in all that they are and do, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who suffer because of working for restorative justice, for theirs is the reign of God.

Blessed are you when they criticize, persecute, and slander you, because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in God.

My friends. Whether you have privilege or luck, be a blessing to those you encounter. When we do that, we are making blessing the determining factor of life, not luck or privilege. And that, my friends is Good News.