

SERMON “Blessings and Blessed”
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31

Christ the Power and Wisdom of God

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’

Matthew 5: 1-12

The Beatitudes

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

SERMON "Blessings and Blessed"

Jesus had been teaching the crowds, healing people, and casting out demons. He had been attracting crowds – those who wanted healing and those who wanted to hear what this new teacher had to say. He had called his disciples, those fishermen who were to become fishers of people.

And his morning we hear Jesus has gone up the side of a mountain with his disciples. He sat down with the disciples at his feet and a crowd of people below. And Jesus began to teach.

He started with the Beatitudes – blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for following Jesus. Or if we look at a different translation, we would say "Happy are those who..."

When was it ever fortunate or blessed to mourn, to be meek, to be poor in spirit, or persecuted? What about these circumstances would make people happy? In Jesus' day, when something good happened to someone, they were blessed. When hardship or illness happened it was because you or your loved one had sinned.

Is it so different now? We count our blessings, those things that we see as positive in our lives – family and friends, good health, financial stability. How is being so poor that your spirit is broken a blessing? Or what about mourning or being meek or being persecuted? How are they blessings?

Do we value mourning and allow people to take as much time as they need to grieve when a loved one dies? Or do we expect people to return to work ASAP after the death of a loved one - ‘You have been home from work for a week – it’s time to get back to your job.’ Do we encourage our youngsters to become peacemakers – to listen to another’s story or thoughts and seek common ground – or do we encourage them to assert themselves and stand their ground at all cost? Do we value meekness or humility? Do we teach our children that these qualities are important? Or do we put those who are boast on a pedestal? Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, admonishes them to only boast in God.

Athletes can make millions of dollars on the court or on the field. They receive lucrative contracts for millions more for advertising a product if they are exceptional at their sport. Sometimes they even demand lots of money. Now, I am not condemning athletes. I am not condemning individuals that receive or professions that provide very large salaries – the definition of which varies from one person to another. But I don’t know that this contributes in meekness. I don’t know that it says we value humility.

Well, I would like to tell you about 2 people with whom I worked over the years. They are meek – humble and gentle. They bring joy to those they encounter on a daily basis. They are loving, cheerful, sensitive individuals who are sensitive to the needs of others. One of them is a home health aide. If my mom were sick, I would want this woman to take care of her. I have worked with many women and men whom I can say this about, but this one woman came to mind when I sat down to write this sermon.

This home health aide provided wonderful personal care to her patients. She did things, extra little things, in their homes to help them. And she sang when she worked... to the delight of her patients. She had a beautiful voice and also sang in her church choir. I learned of this from one of my patients because this woman would never brag about her singing. She would never boast about herself. She was humble.

The other person was one of the housekeeping staff at the hospital where I worked. He collected trash; pushing a large bin through the hospital hallways each and every morning, smiling and wishing everyone a good day. He made me smile every time I saw him. He made everyone smile when he looked at them, smiled at them, and wished them a good day - while he picked up the trash.

These individuals did not make lots of money. That's for sure. They will never be asked to advertise expensive products because we do not elevate their professions. They see and care for individuals who are sick, sometimes physically and emotionally at their worst, or for the staff who care for them. They offer support to whoever they encounter by being who they are and by what they do – and by singing or smiling. They do work that most people would not want to do. But their patients and their patients' families or the hospital staff love them. And I have a lot of respect for them.

Paul, in his letter to the young church in Corinthians, spoke of wisdom, foolishness, and power. He encouraged those members of that community to “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” and if anyone is to boast, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’ ”

I didn't mention that the home health aide and the custodian that I spoke of were both Christians. And I never heard either of them boast about themselves

or the great job they did. They were not powerful or considered wise by societal standards. But they were wise in the way of God, by how they lived; and they could serve as an example of how to live, both in their humility and in the way they cared for others.

These individuals are not unlike others that society tends to overlook – others who are humble, but build up the kingdom on a regular basis by working in humility in jobs that do not get much recognition or acclaim.

I know that everyone here knows someone like that – someone who does a job which is not recognized as important but that we cannot live without, someone who does that job in humility and patience, and shares joy even in difficult times or when people are not at their best.

If we think about it, it might include the cashier who checks out the mother of a crying, or should I say screaming, toddler. That cashier engages that mother with a smile and comforting words- unlike the customer that is next in line who is exasperated and frowning. Or maybe it should include the school bus driver who safely brings a number of noisy excited youngsters home after a long day at school. My dad did that for a while when I was growing up. He shared stories from his job at the end of the day – including ones of children throwing things or hopping over seats – and his having to stop the bus until they settled down. So I heard a lot of what that drive was like many years ago and might be like today.

What do we teach our kids? We want them to have successful careers – make enough money to be financially secure. But do we teach them about or show them what it means to be humble? Do we teach them that those who work at jobs that aren't glamorous deserve respect? That God sees those people as blessed even when in society's wisdom, they are not always valued?

Getting back to athletes, a few years ago, NBA star LeBron James of the Lakers opened a new public school in his home town of Akron, OH. It first opened with 240 students in 3rd and 4th grade. But there were plans to increase that to grades 1-8 over the next 4 years. The students were considered at risk students who

would receive a top notch education. But the school also provided support to their families and even for the teachers. Their school year was longer than traditional public school year – from the end of July 30 through the middle of May. Students also had a longer school day, which went until 5 p.m. It was an amazing venture, meant to serve children and families who struggled. And the day before the school year began, LeBron James tweeted,

“The jitters before the first day of school are real right now!!! Tomorrow is going to be one of the greatest moments (if not the greatest) of my life when we open the #IPromise School. This skinny kid from Akron who missed 83 days of school in the 4th grade had big dreams...”

In that tweet, I detect humility. And I detect hope and a blessing for those children, their parents and their teachers.

Jesus turned the wisdom of his day on its head when he proclaimed that those who were struggling or looked down upon or even persecuted were blessed and would even be rewarded, that their fortunes would be reversed – that the kingdom of heaven will belong to the poor in spirit, that those who mourn will be comforted; that the meek will inherit the earth, that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled, that those who are the merciful will receive mercy, that the pure of heart will see God, that the peacemakers will be called children of God, and that the kingdom of heaven will belong to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Jesus was beginning his ministry and laying the foundation for what his followers could expect. He was beginning it with those who were not rich or powerful, those whom society did not put on a pedestal, those whom society may even looked down upon. Those who were listening, those on the hillside who had

come to be healed or to hear Jesus teach, would have been reassured that they mattered to God. His disciples would have been taught who it was that God considered blessed.

And as Jesus continued his ministry, he taught, he healed, he reached out to the outcast, the oppressed, and those seen as enemies of the Jews. He chastised those with power and wealth, those who served themselves and not their neighbors, those who were proud and thought themselves wise while looking down upon those they considered foolish. Jesus offered, especially to those who struggled, a radical vision of the heavenly kingdom, one based in extravagant love and hope. Jesus lifted up those who society did not see as blessed.

So, as we count our blessings, may we also consider who Jesus said is blessed. May we reflect how we can be the eyes, ears, heart and hands of Jesus so that we too might lift them up. We may not all have the resources to start a school for struggling students. But we can offer a smile, a kind word, compassion and look for ways to support the one who is struggling in spirit or mourning. We can offer respect and acknowledge the dignity of those who are meek. And we can stand with those who advocate for peace and righteousness. As followers of Jesus, we too are called to uplift others. We can be a blessing to the blessed.

