

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: January 29, 2017**

**Matthew 5: 1-12: *Are You Blessed?***

**Preached**

**By**

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**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**I am so blessed. You hear it more and more these days; most noticeably from famous people, and very often in acceptance speeches. They are usually clutching a golden statue and they say, ‘I’m so blessed to be here today’ . . .**

**My issue with such usage is not that it is flippant, or even untrue. Actors and politicians can be deeply sincere about feeling blessed. My issue with such usage is that it is so easy to say. It requires little effort, in a moment of victory, to know oneself as blessed. Perhaps a small dose of humility is necessary, but nothing more. And for those of us watching at home the un-elected, the un-famous it’s easy to nod our heads in agreement and say, “You betcha you’re blessed!” So, my sisters and brothers in Christ, what does it mean to be blessed? Generally we associate a blessing or being blessed with some kind of religious activity.**

**So, what does it mean to be blessed? When someone sneezes we say, “God Bless You.” Where does that come from? When I was in grade school, sister said that we were to say “God bless you” when someone sneezed because when that happens the heart stops for a moment. Which reminds me of Henny Youngman’s great line: “God sneezed. What could I say?”**

**At Christmas, I received a gift of a tiny but very beautiful book of Irish blessings. Our Irish friends are famous for their blessings: One goes, “May you be in heaven 30 minutes before the devil knows you’re dead.” Another blessing says, “God is good, but never dance in a small boat.” That sounds more like good advice rather than a blessing. Another says, “May the roof above us never fall in and may the friends gathered below it never fall out.” A much more profound blessing goes like this: “May love and laughter light your days, and warm your heart and home. May good and faithful friends be yours, wherever you may roam. May peace and plenty bless your world with joy that long endures. May all life’s passing seasons bring the best to you and yours.” Isn’t that nice?**

**My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, our Gospel lesson for today is a collection of Jesus’ most famous and least understood teachings which we know as the Beatitudes. So we ask again, “What does it mean to be blessed?”**

**We can barely get by the first three words, “Blessed are the poor . . .”**

**Matthew reports Jesus’ words as “blessed are the poor in spirit . . .” Luke simply says, “Blessed are the poor . . .” Whichever Jesus meant, it is difficult for us to relate.**

**A few years ago, consumer reporter John Stossel did a report on risk management. How would you rank this list of items in terms of “greatest risk to life” versus “the least risk to life? Here we go: Murder, Fires, Toxic waste, Smoking, Flying and Driving. In terms of days this activity takes off your lifespan, which of these items is the riskiest to human life and health, and which is the least risky? Here is what the research determined: in order from least risky item to most risky, the list should read: Flying notice that this is the least risky activity for those of you who are afraid of flying. Next is Toxic waste, Fires, Murder, Driving and Smoking. In other words, “Flying” carries very little risk, whereas smoking is very hazardous. But Stossel also listed one other risk factor that proved to be worse than all the others, the one that has the potential to cut the most number of days off a person’s life span. The answer is, poverty. Poverty is the single greatest risk factor for a shortened life span. If the average smoker loses about 1,916 days off their life span for smoking, then a person living in poverty loses an average of 3,165 days off their life span nearly twice as many. “Blessed are the poor . . .” and “Blessed**

are the poor in spirit . . .” are both difficult to affirm in our American culture. I want you to think about how poverty impacts a family, especially children. Think of a poor child who is homeless going to school exhausted, dirty, hungry, scared, worried and anxious about the uncertainties of the day that lies ahead. Blessed are the poor... really? What will that poor child learn that day in school? Take a moment and put yourself in that child’s sneakers.

And how about, “Blessed are the meek?” I saw a cartoon in the New Yorker that shows a corporate board sitting around a long table. The CEO says rather cynically, “The meek shall inherit the earth. That’s okay,” he says with a sneer, “We will still own Congress.” There’s probably some truth there.

How about “Blessed are those who mourn . . .” or “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me”? That’s tough one.

I read a wonderful book by Barbara Brown Taylor on the beatitudes, titled “Blessed Are the Upside Down.” She remembers what it is like to be a little girl and stand on her head to liven things up a little. She writes, “Grass hung in front of my eyes like a green fringe. Trees grew down, not up, and the sky was a blue lawn that went on forever. For as long as I kept my balance I could tap dance on it, while birds and clouds flew under my feet. My swing set was

no longer an `A` but a `V` and my house seemed in danger of falling off the yard--just shooting off into space like a rocket--leaving the sidewalk lined with pansies that led to nowhere . In a world where trees grew down and houses might fall up, anything seemed possible.”

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, I think Jesus should have asked the crowd to stand on their heads when he taught them the Beatitudes because that was what he was doing. Jesus was turning the known world upside down, so that those who had been fighting for breath at the bottom of the human heap suddenly found themselves closest to heaven, while those who thought they were on top of things found themselves flat on their backs looking up.

I want to offer you a different perspective on the word blessed. The Greek word for blessed is *makarios*. It is also the name of a Greek island in the Mediterranean Sea, called Makarios Island. It was known as the blessed island because it was self-contained. The residents didn't need to leave the island in order to get their needs met. The island offered everything that they needed. The natural resources of the blessed island were so thick, so rich, so fruitful, and so productive that everything they needed to enjoy their lives was already built-in. The inhabitants of the island were self-sustained and self-

**contained without having to run to another island to get their needs met. The blessed island provided everything they needed.**

**My brothers and sisters all the stuff you get is outside of you. The new car, the new house, and the new money are all fine but they are all extra. They are a bonus. In the biblical world of being blessed, you should be okay being on the island. Just being in the Kingdom of God with Jesus ought to put you in a blessed location. One of the ways you know that you are NOT blessed in the biblical sense of the word is that you have to keep leaving the island to have fun. You need more than your relationship with God to have peace. You crave more than your communion with the God to have joy in your life. My brothers and sisters the blessed person finds their sufficiency with God.**

**But perhaps the best explanation of being blessed I've heard comes from rock star Bono, the lead singer of the Irish rock group U2. Speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast years ago, Bono was asked by then President George W. Bush to give the homily. Bono gave an honest and moving sermon, quoting Scripture in a number of places, about the need for the world to focus on the needs of the poor, especially the poor in Africa. At one point Bono began to share the turning point in his own faith story which brought him closer to God. He said that years ago he met a wise man who changed his life.**

**“In countless ways,” Bono says, “I was always seeking the Lord’s blessing. I was saying, you know, I have this new song, look after it, Lord. I have a family, look after them, Lord. I have this idea. The wise man said, “Stop. Just stop it!” Stop asking God to bless what you’re doing. Get involved in what God is doing because it’s already blessed. “Well? God is with the poor,” Bono continues. “That, I believe, is what God is doing.”**

**Brothers and sisters, so you say you are blessed. I have no doubt you are. Everyone in this Holy Trinity Church is blessed in some respect. So here is our challenge this week, are we blessed in the way Christ would have us be blessed? Do your values reflect Jesus’ values, particularly with regard for love for our neighbor? Are we blessed simply being in God’s presence or does blessing for us have to include all our stuff? Stuff can actually be a hindrance to being blessed. Finally, are you involved in what God is doing bringing a new world into being, a world of compassion, a world of mercy, a world of kindness, a world of caring, a world of justice, a world of reconciliation, a world of forgiveness and finally a world of peace? Saints are people who know what it is to be blessed, not in the way the world understands blessing, but in the way Jesus Christ modeled blessedness for us. Just think about it this week, are you truly blessed and if not, then why not? AMEN.**