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Matthew 5:1-12
Redefining Gratitude

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Matthew 5:1-12 New Revised Standard Version

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.

 It feels awkward saying I am blessed. Lea Anne Hicks, who is on a camping trip with her Girl Scout troop this weekend, talked about this on a recent Facebook post. She talked about how often we hear the word blessed and we think of the person who was saved from the hurricane. The person whose home is safe after a natural disaster and in a TV interview they say, “We were blessed.” The term blessed can be problematic when you think about how many things in your life you have no control over. We don’t decide our family of origin. We don’t decide if our family was supportive or not. We don’t decide if we experienced poverty or abuse or racial prejudice. Lea Anne said many of us started out life ahead of the game not because God favors us or blessed us more than others, but simply because of luck.[[1]](#footnote-1)

These verses are known as the Beatitudes because on the mountain that day Jesus blesses everyone. All are blessed. Writer and preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber said that she likes to imagine Jesus here standing among us saying, “Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren’t sure, who can still be surprised. Blessed are they for whom nothing seems to be working. Blessed are the pre-schoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are they who can’t fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex-workers and the night shift street sweepers. Blessed are the losers and the babies and the parts of ourselves that are so small. The parts of ourselves that don’t want to make eye contact with a world that only loves the winners. Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented. Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard – for they are those with whom Jesus chose to surround himself. Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists. Blessed are foster kids and trophy kids and special ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved and never does”.[[2]](#footnote-2) I love those alternative Beatitudes.

 In Jesus’ day, the culture said you were blessed if you were rich and powerful. In Jesus’ day, the world said the blessed were the big shots, the upper crust, those who lived above all the worries of normal existence.[[3]](#footnote-3) All blessings flowed down from the Emperor in the Roman Empire. When Jesus said blessed are the poor, he overturned the idea of being blessed. Blessings don’t come from the Emperor down, they come from God to everyone. God gives gifts to everyone, especially to the vulnerable and those at the bottom of society.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Jesus came as one of us, as a powerless baby. Jesus knows that in our world we admire strength and might, but God values vulnerability. How easy it is for us to feel unseen, or no longer useful. God makes beautiful things out of dust. We don’t sit at God’s table because we are worthy but because we are hungry. Just like Jesus says at the Last Supper and as we say at the Communion table, this is my body, broken for you, given for you. Come are you are. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There is a Jewish folktale about two beggars who went daily to the palace to beg at the king's gate for bread. Every day the king gave each of them a loaf of bread. One of the beggars always thanked the king for his generosity, but the other thanked God for giving the king sufficient wealth to give charitably. The second beggar's words always hurt the king. So the king decided to teach him a lesson. The king ordered his baker to bake two identical loaves, but one concealed precious jewels. Then he instructed the baker to give the loaf with the hidden jewels to the beggar who always thanked the king for his charity.

The next day the baker went to the king's gate and handed the two loaves to the beggars. He took great care not to confuse the two, for he feared the king's wrath. When the beggar with the special loaf felt how heavy and hard it was, he concluded that it was poorly made and asked the other beggar to exchange loaves with him. The second beggar, always eager to help a friend, agreed. Then they went their separate ways. When the second man bit into the loaf, he discovered that it was filled with jewels. He thanked God for his good fortune, grateful that he would no longer have to beg for his bread. The next morning the king was surprised to find only the first beggar at the palace gate. He had the baker brought before him and asked him, "Did you mix up the two loaves I had you bake?" "No, your majesty," answered the baker. "I did exactly as you asked." Then the king turned to the beggar and asked, "What did you do with the loaf you received yesterday?" The man replied, "It was hard and poorly baked, so I gave it to my friend in exchange for his."

God is the giver of all bread and all possessions. In the Lord’s Prayer we ask that God give us this day our daily bread. We acknowledge that God gives us all that we need to survive: breathe, life, food, shelter, all our possessions, health, our family and friends. Everything. We are called to be bread for one another when we share the bread that we have been given.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For the last few weeks we have been talking about redefining gratitude. Our world seems to be shaped by fear instead of thankfulness. The brain cannot be in a state of gratitude and a state of fear at the same time. Gratitude stops fear. There is so much in our lives that works against joy, love, and peace, and gratitude can be easily blocked by regret, loss, anger, and fear.[[7]](#footnote-7) Gratitude rearranges the way that we see and experience what is all around us. Gratitude makes all things new. Gratitude shows us that there is hope; that suffering, pain, and injustice don’t have the last word.[[8]](#footnote-8)

 Gratitude is about paying attention to good things, and not living on autopilot. When we can be grateful each and every day, it can become a habit of well-being. Gratitude is about creating rituals of thanksgiving like daily gratitude journals, writing thank you notes, meditating, praying with gratitude beads, and doing good things for others in need. We need daily cues when we are drinking our morning coffee or walking to school or driving to work or sitting down for a meal that remind us to be aware of the goodness all around us. We need to shift our perspective. We need to work to make gratitude and thanksgiving a long-term habit so that we are more aware of the good that is all around us. When you look for things to be grateful for, you find them.[[9]](#footnote-9) Gratitude builds on itself.

 We are grateful because God blesses us all. 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. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. https://www.facebook.com/lea.hicks.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/11/some-modern-beatitudes-a-sermon-for-all-saints-sunday/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/11/some-modern-beatitudes-a-sermon-for-all-saints-sunday/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://sermonstories.blogspot.com/search/label/blessing [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)