

LEGACIES OF BLESSING

Matthew 5.1-12

November 5, 2017, All Saints

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Anthem: Shall We Gather at the River

I love this old hymn. It's a testimony to its power that, about one hundred years after it was written, Aaron Copeland arranged it for his collection of *Old American Songs*.

The original writer, Robert Lowry, was the pastor of Hanson Place Baptist Church in Brooklyn. Eventually Lowry gave up preaching to write songs instead because, he said, more people could be reached through songs than his sermons.

And this song was timely. It was written on an oppressively hot afternoon in 1864. The Civil War was raging. And between the heat and the headlines, Lowry was exhausted. As he was trying to take a nap, the vision of Revelation 22 grabbed his imagination with its new city, and its crystal river, and that great crowd from every nation and every language gathered to eat together and to sing together.

"My soul seemed to take new life," he writes ...

I began to wonder why the hymn writers had said so much about the "river of death" and so little about the "pure water of life," clear as crystal ... As I mused, the words began to construct themselves. They came first as a question ..., "Shall we gather?" Then they broke out in a chorus, "Yes, we'll gather."

The legacy of that odd and troubling vision in Revelations, written long before out of its own experience of death and total destruction, became a blessing of imagination and hope. And it was out of that blessing that Robert Lowry, on a hot afternoon in 1864, at the brink of complete exhaustion, leaves us this legacy of music.

And Lowry offers something more. Not just the vision of a new city and a new way of being together. But an opportunity to make our own commitment. Shall we gather at the river?

Shall we immerse ourselves in this vision of hope?

Shall we drink from those deep wells of love and justice?

Shall we step into the flow of this river of blessing?

Like old pastor Lowry, we may be exhausted and doubtful and broken, but we say YES!

YES! to that gathering of people from every age and every nation and every language.

YES! to those things that fill us up with hope.

YES! to clear cool water that feeds our planet.

YES! to each other because YES! we'll gather.

Shall we gather at the river? YES!

And here we are.

Legacies of blessing come to us from the oddest places. From the book of Revelation to an exhausted Baptist preacher in Brooklyn to the imperfect and sometimes unlikely people in our own lives who teach us to say YES! to the things we know really matter.

And so we come this morning to these famous blessings – the Beatitudes – in Matthew 5.

Some scholars point out that this may be Jesus reframing the Ten Commandments as blessings rather than demands.

It could be Jesus establishing a new prophetic tradition, along the lines of those prophetic values from the prophet Micah that we have claimed for ourselves: “We will go deeper in faith as we do justice, love mercy, work for peace and walk humbly with God.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice” and do it!
“Blessed are the merciful,” who love mercy.
“Blessed are the peacemakers,” who are working for peace every day.
“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” who teach us to walk humbly with God.

In other words, the legacy of blessing in the covenant of the Law and in the preaching of the prophets is not some kind of legalistic negative agenda. It’s saying YES! to the ways of being in the world that help us imagine ourselves and each other in the fullness – in the blessing – of all that it means to be human.

And here’s the thing. With all that’s wrong with the world, I think we have come to imagine justice as just another burden we have to bear. Just another boycott we have to put up with. Just another strategy we have to put together to fight some bad new legislation.

But what if justice was never meant to be a burden? What if it’s about blessing? What if it’s about our lives being a blessing today in that long arc of history, Dr. King talks about, that bends toward justice?

What if our lives are not just about the burdens of this moment but about the legacies of blessing we have received and that we carry on by saying YES?

On this All Saints Sunday, I am remembering my friend Elizabeth Patrick. She is a saint not because she was perfect but because she has left a legacy of blessing in my life. After she died, several of her books came to live at my house. Some went to Companis and some came to live with me.

And one of those books is a feminist reflection on the Beatitudes by Christin Lore Weber. And I was struck by what she says about the Beatitudes not being “laws to be obeyed, but blessings to be contemplated and incarnated.”

If we approach their meaning through analysis we will fail to understand them, she says. Instead we need to receive them with love, as the seed is received, and hold them within us until they bear fruit in our lives. We cannot explain them [they are, after all, paradoxical]; but we can tell stories about finding them enfleshed in the people and situations we encounter.

I find this very helpful. So I want to read these familiar Beatitudes as a litany of the legacies of blessing in our own lives that have been “enfleshed,” as Weber says, “in the people and situations we encounter.”

So this is what I mean.

Close your eyes.

Take a moment to center yourselves.

Breathe in ... and then let the cares and the frustrations and the busyness of this morning flow out of your body with your breath.

And, as I read each of these blessings, I will pause and invite you to listen for a name or to see a face or to remember a moment that embodies that blessing.

Matthew 5:1-12

5 When Jesus* saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit – who or what has taught you to walk humbly with God; who gave you hope that you did not have to live in pretenses; who fearlessly named the empty places in their own hearts ...

Listen for a name. Look for a face. Remember a moment.

... that is the reign of heaven.

4 ‘Blessed are those who mourn – those who have taught us to do the good work of grief, who are open about their losses, who are not afraid of tears ...

... they are comfort.

5 'Blessed are the meek – the ones who know how to yield their power and their privilege for the sake of justice ... a name, a face, a memory?
... they inherit the earth.

6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – those who have whet your appetite for justice ...
... they will be filled.

7 'Blessed are the merciful – the ones who delight in random acts of kindness and know how to do the complicated work of forgiveness ...
Do you see them, hear them, remember a time?
... they receive mercy.

8 'Blessed are the pure in heart – the ones who have shown us the way of authenticity and integrity ...
... they see God.

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers – the ones who teach us the ways of peace and are never fooled by that delicious desire for revenge ... Do you see them?
... they are the children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice – the ones who didn't give up on the world and kept saying YES! in the face of others' NO! ...
... they have already won.

[Blessed are all those who have left us these legacies of blessing so that ...]

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely* on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessed are you when you stand in that long line of prophets who have said YES! to another vision of the world.

When I think about those who have given me an appetite for justice, I see the faces of Autumn Franger and Amber Joy and Elizabeth Patrick. I would see any of them coming toward me and I knew there was some great wrong that needed to be addressed; some vision for a new way of being that had been betrayed; some squandering of the great gift of being human.

Their hunger and thirst was contagious. It may not have always felt like a blessing but they filled me up with hope about what the world could be. When I think of them, I hear Christin Lore Weber:

Those who hunger and thirst for justice shall be filled, the filling shall not appease the hunger nor slake the thirst. Instead this divine Fullness will expand our hearts to desire a justice that is greater yet. This Fullness will create that space in us in which the losses and sorrows of a broken world can be contained and transformed ... [it] hollows our lives into a cup to collect the blood of a torn world and transform[s] it into the wine of justice.

Are you hungry this morning?

Are you thirsty for some way to bless the world?

Well, you've come to the right place. This little bit of bread and the little cup are not meant to fill you up. They are meant to give you a taste – to cultivate an appetite - for that divine Fullness that can expand your heart and create space in you for all that is broken and to transform it all into something that can bless the world.

This Table is God saying YES! to you. YES to all that is broken. And YES to all the ways it can be transformed into blessing.

And today, if you hear that voice – if you hear that YES! – let it break open your heart to bless the world.

NOTES

The story about Robert Lowry's, "Shall We Gather at the River," is in *Then Sings My Soul* by Robert J. Morgan (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), p.153. Christin Lore Weber, *Blessings: A WomanChrist Reflection on the Beatitudes* (Harper and Row, 1989), pp.3 & 100.