

**“Blessed by God?”**  
**Matthew 5:1-12**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**4th Sunday after Epiphany**  
**February 2, 2020**

This past week is not one that I would describe as blessed. On Monday, while changing the radiator in a car with one of my daughters on the streets of west Baltimore, we ducked down as we heard gunfire ring out with so many rounds I was sure someone was dead. Three people shot, including a boy just a few years younger than my daughter. On Tuesday, the Mayor stood me up along with a group of BUILD leaders who arrived early in the day to use our time efficiently for what we thought would be a strategy session for leverage statewide Kirwan education funding. Blatant disrespect. The next day a friend shared that she had lost two friends recently to overdoses - more senseless loss of life. Our Governor and our President had once said that attacking opioid addiction was a top priority, but I haven't heard anything from either one of them lately. In my own southwest Baltimore neighborhood a new heroin market is so alive and well that someone posted it as a business location on Google maps.<sup>1</sup> On Friday I had a frank conversation with a high level city employee who confirmed for me that our city management is so broken that even if we were to agree on the best policy directions forward, we are not in a position to implement them in a meaningful way. And then there's the trial of our President. I never thought I'd see the day when a President, using his office to solicit foreign governments to help him win elections is treated by some, as not a big deal.

I'm concerned about all of these things, but perhaps my biggest area of concern was noticing the changes in my own reactions to all of this news. Where there used to be anger and urgency, now there seems like something of acceptance of the unacceptable. Too blessed to be stressed? Maybe Or maybe it's like I've just discovered something like a cancer of cynicism that has been growing, undetected, until just this week. I listen enough to know that I'm not the only one feeling this way which is why I'm most concerned. When anger moves to cynicism, the theologian Jurgen Moltmann once said, the death of the church is near.<sup>2</sup> Is the death of the soul near too?

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<sup>1</sup> For those outside of Baltimore who are skeptical, please see Dan Rodericks, *The Baltimore Sun*, “Did Someone Put this Drug Corner on Google Maps?” January 21, 2020, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/columnists/dan-rodricks/bs-md-rodricks-0122-20200121-xfistlbu4fgvbjboajuytnie2a-story.html> .

<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London: SCM Press, 1973) cited in Charles James Cook, “Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2010, p.312.

I wonder if Jesus felt that cancer of the soul creeping into the body of his disciples on the day when he took them up the mountain and sat down to teach. He had seen the crowds, according to the text - more need that he could satisfy - and instead of putting his nose to the grind he took his team up on the mountain. Think about that for a moment. Before he took any meaningful action to address the urgent neediness before him, he got together his top leaders to teach - to recenter them and maybe to recenter himself, too. He told them first about God's blessings. "Blessed" is a word that is used so often, especially in Baltimore, that it's worth reminding ourselves what it means. It's closely connected to those deep theological words of shalom in the Hebrew scriptures and salvation in the New Testament. It's not superficial happiness, but a deep contentment, freedom, peace. One scholar describes the blessedness that Jesus articulates as "being near God, being in sync with God, snuggling up close to truth, committed to follow in Jesus' way."<sup>3</sup>

It's important to return to these root understandings since so many of us have, at times, thought about the call of Jesus as a burden rather than the place where we are promised a deep commitment, freedom, and peace. We think about the call to be in solidarity with the poor and suffering as a burden, not as the place where we find life. We think about the call to extend forgiveness as something that goes against our own interests, not something that brings us peace. We think about peacemaking as something that puts us at risk, not something that gives us hope of a future. Sometimes we need to get away from the tyranny of the urgent, go up on the mountain away from the daily pressures, sit down with Jesus, and listen. There is life to be found here with him.

Of course, the beatitudes are not only here to remind us of how much we need God's grace. They are statements that tell us who receives that grace - not everyone, according to Matthew. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted. It only seems like good news if you find yourself in those kinds of categories. Categories of need. Those who are "poor in spirit" - both those being crushed by economic poverty and those who are affluent but known their dependence upon God. Those who mourn - who can, in Richard Rohr's words, "enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to extract themselves from it."<sup>4</sup> Those who are meek - those who trust in God's power even when struggling against powers and principalities that seem so much greater. And those who hunger and thirst for justice - those who hunger for things to be put right and give their time and energy to make it so.

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<sup>3</sup> Howell, James C. *The Beatitudes for Today*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2006, p. 1. This citation comes from the Rev. Jessica Tate's paper to the WELL preaching group in 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Rohr is quoted in Howell, quoted in Jessica Tate. Jessica's paper informed many of the descriptions that I've given for these beatitudes.

These are people who know they need God desperately. And one only needs God's grace if your priorities are God's priorities. If you're in solidarity with the pain of the world, you'll need God's hope. If you trust in God's power instead of those of the markets, or political power, you'll need God's hope. If you hunger for the things God hungers for then you'll suffer each time another bullet leaves a gun, everytime another child is lost to the streets, everytime our governments fail to do their job to make our communities whole.

Ironically, this place of neediness is the only place where hope is found. Marilynne Robinson says that "hope implies a felt lack, an absence, a yearning. . ." <sup>5</sup> Hope, she says, is love projected forward. It is what love would be fully realized which is why we only experience hope in absence. Blessed are you who mourn for you shall be comforted. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you shall be filled. Hope is only felt as absence which is what distinguishes it from optimism.

And this is why the alarm bells go off whenever I detect anything that seems like cynicism in myself. Cynicism is the easy way out, or so it seems. If you can't get your hopes fulfilled - the poor get worse, those who mourn suffer more losses, those who are vulnerable become even more vulnerable - then you just dumb down your hopes so you don't ever have to be disappointed. Or more to our situation - the streets get rougher, the addicted and those who are distressed die more often, our democracy get more inept. The easy way out is to adjust your expectations. Recalibrate your standards away from God's dreams and more to what actually seems possible. Realign your life so you don't need hope, you don't even need faith, you don't need God. Let your anger over the world as it should be cool to the acceptance of the world as it is.

There is a different way. It's not working harder, at least not initially. It is going up on the mountain to make sure you are viewing the world the way Jesus sees it. Not as void of God's blessing but filled with it. Not as full of people who are not wealthy enough, or good enough, or happy enough to change their surrounds but blessed by God in the midst of their "not enoughness." Not as hopeless in our ability to change what needs to be changed, but on the right track everytime we mourn the gap between what is and what we know can be.

When we see the world through God's eyes, we see that we are blessed, indeed. We're blessed because God loves us and adores us. We're blessed because God has given us enough resources to be shared. We're blessed because God is a forgiving God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We're blessed because God is a justice-making God, always working to broaden the circle of who has enough. We're blessed because even when we lack, we see that the hunger there is a product of God's vision, shared with human beings who are made in God's image. And when we know

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<sup>5</sup> Marilynne Robinson, "Considering the Theological Virtues," *What Are We Doing Here? Essays*, (New York: Picador Publishing), 2018, pp. 225 - 237.

that blessing deep down in the core of ourselves, then we are able to go distances beyond what we thought possible, be part of change beyond what we imagined, transform our world in all the ways that many have already given up on.

David Lose, when he was in graduate school, always felt uncomfortable when one of my teachers, Dr. Cleophus LaRue, would regularly address him as "Dr. Lose." So uncomfortable was he that he finally said to his teacher, "But Dr. LaRue, I haven't earned my doctorate yet. I don't think you should call me that." "Dr. Lose," he patiently responded, "in the African-American church we are not content to call you what you are, but instead call you what we believe you will be!"<sup>6</sup> Love projected forward.

If there's one thing that these times can teach us, we can't change anything that is hard to change and therefore worthy of our lives, without God's power. Don't lose God's way of seeing the world. Don't dumb down your expectations into the small boxes that have become so much a part of our cynical status quo. Hold onto the vision, and pay attention to that grief in your gut. It is the place where hope is born. Love, projected forward in ways we don't yet see.

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<sup>6</sup> David Lose, "God Bless You," *Dear Working Preacher Blog*, Luther Seminary, January 23, 2011, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=1542>. Once again, this reference came from Jessica Tate's paper to the WELL.