

## What's a 'blessing' anyway?

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
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“Jesus looked up at his disciples and said,  
*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God...  
But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*”

I'm surprised there's not a little sticky note in the margin of my Sunday lectionary that says, “Preach on something else. —This is not a suitable text for Episcopalians.”

“*Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich.*” —This makes it seem like it's good to be poor and bad to be rich! I bet if you went into any poverty-stricken neighborhood in any big city in America ...Denver, ...L.A., ...Chicago, ...Detroit, ...Miami, and asked people on the street if they thought it was a good thing to be poor and a bad thing to be rich, nobody would say, “Man, it's great to be poor! I am *so* happy. We're so lucky to be on welfare, with no health insurance, living in a rat-trap walk-up apartment. I'd be really bummed if we had to live in a big house and waste all our time having fun and eating in four-star restaurants.”

“*Blessed are you who are poor... Woe to you who are rich.*” Jesus did say that. —What was his point? Let's try to understand him this morning, because there's more wisdom here than we're able to grasp right away.

First off, it's really important for us to be *thankful*. Complaining about what we *want or need*, but don't have, comes a lot more naturally to most of us than giving thanks to God for what we *already have*.

It's a spiritual commonplace that we ought to “count our blessings.” But these sayings of Jesus that we read from Luke's gospel today raise a very serious question: **Are we able to recognize a real blessing when we see one?**

First off, notice that Jesus is speaking to his disciples here. He isn't addressing an assortment of people, some of whom were disciples and others of whom were critics or skeptics or naysayers. The audience was composed of people who were disciples, people who had decided to follow Jesus. He spoke to them very personally and very directly, in the second person plural:

*Blessed are you poor...  
Blessed are you that hunger now...  
Blessed are you that weep now...  
Blessed are you when people hate you on account of the Son of Man...*

Neither the poor people nor the rich people Jesus was talking to regarded poverty as a “blessing.” Not any more than we do. ...Nor hunger. —Of course, for people like me who are carrying a few more pounds around the midsection than are good for us, it *might* be a blessing to go hungry. But when I see a Sudanese baby with the symptoms of severe malnutrition, I don't think of that child's hunger as any kind of “blessing.”

But maybe Jesus was (and *is*) trying to teach his disciples (then and now) something about what a “blessing” really is. Usually, I look at our nice new car, this comfortable house the church provides for us to live in, and I say, “We're blessed.” I look around at this beautiful place in the heart of the Rockies and at you lovely people in this congregation, and I say, “We're blessed.”

Then we go down to Denver and drive through some of the seedy neighborhoods there – like no place in Aspen – where bars cover the windows of old, run-down houses and where the evidence of poverty and

deprivation are easy to see, and I think, “These people *need* to be blessed.” I’m prosperous and comfortable. They’re unemployed and UN-comfortable. So, I’m blessed, and they’re *not*. —Right?

Jesus would say, “*Not so easy. Think again. ...Blessed are you poor, for yours in the Kingdom of God. ...But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.*”

Jesus is trying to get his disciples to *think* here. This is *wisdom*, not social commentary. The word our Bibles usually translate “blessed” is a Greek word that means “happy” —or even “lucky.” The *wisdom* in Jesus’ saying, the theological point of this, is found here: “Lucky” people, “happy” people are the ones who trust in God, who look to God for their needs to be met, who know — deep in their hearts — that the future is in God’s hands, not theirs.

When we Christians (we who might rightly claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ) have “things” — money, investments, lots of real estate, plenty of toys — we may *call* these goodies “blessings” and we may *say* that we really put our trust in God, but in every one of the tests of trust that life brings our way, we are (by reflex) inclined to rely *not* on God, but on the personal power that comes from affluence. We’re “hard-wired,” you might say, in every time of crisis to put our confidence in ourselves and our material resources... to rely *first of all* and *most of all* on what St. Paul (and the prophet Jeremiah, too) would have called “the flesh,” rather than on the Spirit. Our reflex is to put our trust in what we can control, rather than in God —who is always *beyond* our control.

But: having an easy, readily available, socially acceptable alternative to God is *not* — in fact — a “blessing.” —Not, at least, in the eyes of Jesus. (Don’t you think that it’s wonderfully, deliciously ironic that every coin, every banknote in this country has the words “In God We Trust” stamped on it? )

Jesus wants us — his disciples — to rethink what “blessings” are, and re-assess what things in life are *means* towards the *end* of a deeper, fuller, more truly God-centered life —a life that’s rooted in love for God, love for neighbor, and even love for enemies. All love is a risk. All love demands a leap of faith. Such a risk-taking, loving life is the life of those whose trust is not in their personal resources (whether material or social), but in the God who promised “*If you seek me, you shall surely find me, if you seek me with all your heart.*” Jesus said, “*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” The challenge is for us to decide what really constitutes our “treasure.”

For example: Some good, fiscally conservative, prudent managers might look at the Christ Church budget for 2004, see that it includes about a \$20,000 deficit, and begin to worry. In Jesus’ way of wisdom, that deficit is not a cause for worry. It’s a blessing ...*if* it turns our hearts to God, “from whom all blessings flow.”

Here’s a definition for you. If you don’t remember anything else I’ve said this morning, hang on to this: *Blessings are the experiences in life that toss us into the arms of God, that throw us back upon our need for Him. Anything that draws us to God, that causes us to depend on God, is a blessing.* (And anything that does the opposite is a curse!)

We’re blessed when we don’t have a glib answer to the hard questions, and we have to seek the face of God. We’re blessed when we don’t have the power to save ourselves or our loved ones, and we have to seek the mercy of God.

“Blessings” are the experiences in life that force us to say, and truly *mean*, “There’s nothing we can do but pray.” When that happens, we’re living in the Kingdom of God. And that’s the greatest blessing of all!