

“Congratulations To Those Who Suffer!”

Steve Ramer, Pastor
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Scriptures

Matthew 5:1-11

*Congratulations to the poor in spirit!
Heaven’s domain belongs to them.
Congratulations to those who grieve!
They will be consoled.
Congratulations to the gentle!
They will inherit the earth.
Congratulations to those who hunger and thirst for justice!
They will have a feast.
Congratulations to the merciful!
They will receive mercy.
Congratulations to those with an undefiled heart!
They will see God.
Congratulations to those who work for peace!
They will be known as God’s children.
Congratulations to those who have suffered persecution
for the sake of justice!
Heaven’s domain belongs to them.
Congratulations to you when they denounce you and persecute you
and spread malicious gossip about you because of me.*

Sermon

Variations of what we call the “Beatitudes” can be found in three places in ancient Christian scripture. Two are found in the canonical gospels of Matthew and Luke, while the other is found in apocryphal Gospel of Thomas.

But in all three, Jesus declares that certain groups of folks are considered to be in God’s special favor. In most translations those folks are said to be, “Blessed!” a term that is rather archaic in modern English.

Merriam-Webster defines “blessed” as “held in reverence - venerated, honored in worship or HALLOWED, BEATIFIC, of or enjoying happiness bringing pleasure, contentment, or good fortune.”

Some version use the term “happy” which only seems a partial capture of the meaning.

The Version I selected for this morning uses the term “congratulations,” which good ole Merriam-Webster defines as:

“to express vicarious pleasure to (a person) on the occasion of success or good fortune, or graciously congratulated the winner or to feel pleased with.”

Well, see for yourself, what you decide, after I’m done here.

In Luke’s accounting, he includes only four congratulations compared to the ten that we read from Matthew’s.

Luke also adds four condemnations, while the Gospel of Thomas has no damnations.

Thomas shares three of Luke’s congratulatory affirmations, that are aimed at the poor, the hungry and the persecuted.

There are several other major differences between those three listings but I will save those for another time.

However, I do wonder if we should be using any of those terms when we are talking with those who are suffering, or persecuted, or reviled? Doesn’t it sound a bit condescending to tell those who are suffering that they should feel blessed or to be happy?

Now typically I do not feel all that fortunate when I am going through a really tough time. And whether you say, “Congratulations” or “be happy” or “how fortunate” to those who are suffering, it does seem a bit cruel for Jesus to say any of these!

I really don’t think that I can say this, since quite a few folks come through our doors looking for help and sometimes . . . maybe just a little bit of hope.

Some need food, or shelter, or maybe money to buy medications. Many, may just need a compassionate listening ear or a place to rest. How can I say to them, “Well congratulations!” “Please allow me to vicariously enjoy your good fortune!”

And you all would probably be justified to start looking for another pastor if in coming to me after the death of a loved one I congratulated you for being so fortunate in your loss!

So I ask, "What is going on here, Jesus?"

But if we understand Jesus as someone who was constantly provoking his audiences to truly listen, then we might understand his choice of words as a very effective tactic to catch his audience's attention.

Those in the audience were likely poor, downtrodden folks who had very difficult lives and would have no doubt experienced all those things Jesus mentioned. The poor and those who suffer are to be pitied not congratulated! In his time, as in ours, this would be most counterintuitive.

Now we likely all know folks who have lost someone very dear to them, maybe a close friend or a spouse, or a child, or maybe a parent. The pain seems almost etched upon their face, as their voice still breaks at odd times, and tears well up in awkward moments.

We too may end up hurting with them as well. But we would never think to congratulate them. But we also know that suffering, sadness, and pain can also be powerfully transforming experiences.

For instance, when we understand more clearly our own poverty of spirit, we then become more open to others who also are also struggling to follow God's will!

Acknowledging that we fail sometimes to do what is right also helps us to be more patient with the failures of others. We know that those who hunger and thirst for justice and peace may end up experiencing far more defeats than triumphs, but oh, how sweet do those few victories then become!

So often our kindness is met with anger or even worse, cynicism. But that experience can hopefully inform our own responses when we see others reaching out with kindness.

Hopefully when I feel hurt due the words others use, I then learn to be more careful with the words I chose to use. What baby has ever been born without pain? And yet the pain is immediately replaced with adoration. What sweet victory of justice was ever accomplished without a struggle?

Who among us knows anyone who has ever lived without any pain or difficulties or even any times of deep sadness?

Of course, we should be happy and enjoy the times when good things happen, and feel fortunate when things go our way. We should appreciate the good, and as the scriptures say, "laugh with those who are laughing."

We do not need to seek out persecution to feel justified by God. Life, we know, is already full enough troubles and plenty of tests and trials, as well as far too many struggles.

But as human beings, we not only share all these experiences, but we need not suffer any of these alone. And even though in the moment, we may not consider ourselves lucky when we suffer, we can be confident that with suffering, our faith can still sprout, take root and grow.

And because of God's bounteous love that flows through his people, we indeed will find consolation for our tears just as we seek to also console others.

We will feast at the table of justice and peace in spite of the struggle. And we will experience mercy, forgiveness and love, not because we deserve it or get it due to our pure motives, but simply because we too tried to be merciful, kind, and pure in spirit.

So regardless if you are feeling good or bad, happy or sad, lucky or not, the hard times can make you stronger, more compassionate, more appreciative, more generous, and filled with more joy.

Allow me to end this morning with a farming analogy from my childhood growing up on a farm. (okay, I see those eyes rolling, "ughh... not another farming story!") In western Kansas the main crop is hard red winter wheat that was brought to the western plains by German-Russian immigrants. The climate is perfect there and thus the western plains of Kansas became the bread basket of the nation.

It is called "winter wheat" because it is sown and sprouts during the fall rains and then spends the harsh winters in a living, yet semi-dormant stage. Then when the spring sun warms the soil and rains begin in earnest, it will grow three or four feet in less than two months.

But before that can happen it must survive freezing nights, snowy days,
and the relentless northern winds that can blow 24 - 7 all winter long!

But the tiny wheat plant will thrive come spring precisely because
of what doesn't survive those harsh Kansas winters: the very
pests and diseases that could be fatal to the plant, freeze during the winter.

Then when spring comes, provided the weather is cooperative
(not too wet or too cold), the plant will get a good head start
on anything that might come along to attack it.

For months, the wheat fields look like little has changed
and one might begin to wonder just how anything
could still be alive out there after such harsh winter weather.

But that which does survive, within just a few sunny
warm days, will begin to burst forth in flourishing amazement.

So "congratulations!"
Life is difficult and sometime really hard.
To expect otherwise is to be naïve.
But the good news is that
the fruit of those hardship is so much sweeter.

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